ソードアート・オンライン
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SWORD ART ONLINE
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ソードアート・オンライン13
アリシゼーション・ディバイディング

「咲け、青薔薇」
《公理教会》の象徴である白亜の塔《セントラル・カセドラル》、最高司祭《アドミニストレータ》の待つ最上階を目指すキリトとユージオ。

ついに二人は、《金木犀》の整合騎士アリスと再び対面する。しかし、キリトとアリスの《武装完全支配術》が暴走して塔の外壁を破壊、二人はカセドラルの外へと投げ出されてしまう。

キリトと離ればなれになったユージオは、相棒の存命を信じ、単身塔を上り続ける。そんな彼の前に現れたのは、最古にして最強の整合騎士、ベルクーリ・シンセシス・ワン。

子供の頃から憧れていた伝説の武人を前に、ユージオは青薔薇の剣を抜く。

その決闘の結末は、一人の剣士の誕生により幕を閉じる。

キリト不在の中、ユージオは整合騎士の鎧に身を包み、瞳に冷たい光を浮かべ——。

か-16-28

ソードアート・オンライン13
アリシゼーション・ディバイディング

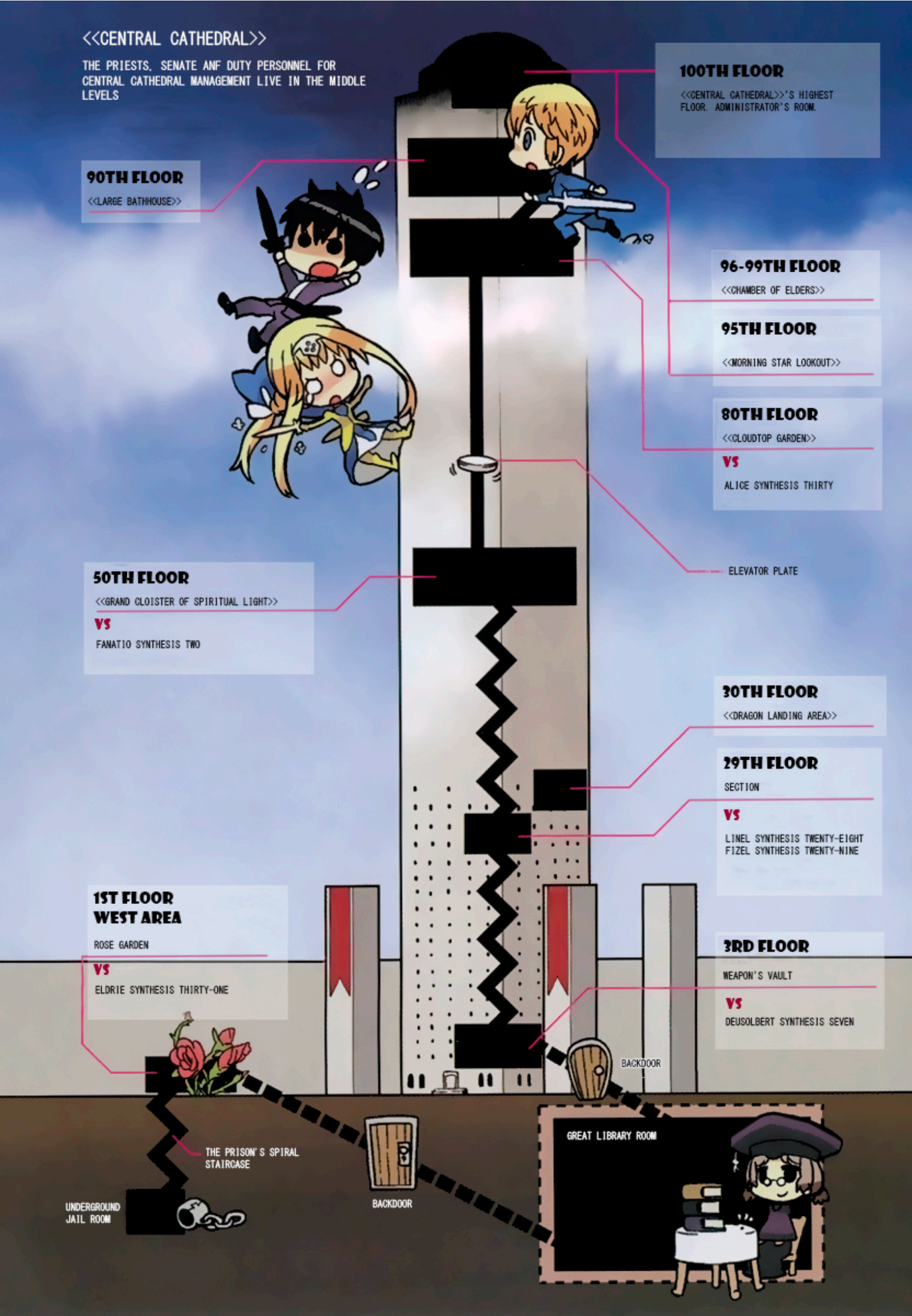
川原礫

電撃文庫

「NOW THAT'S ONE UNCOMMON STANCE, BOY. ...YOU DON'T HAPPEN TO PRACTICE THE CONTINUAL SWORD, DO YOU?」
BERCOULI SYNTHESIS ONE
§
WIELDER OF <<TIME PIERCING SWORD>>. THE STRONGEST SWORDSMAN.
「...RELAXED, AREN'T YOU.」
EUGEO
§
THE BOY WHOM KIRITO MET IN THIS WORLD. TO RETRIEVE HIS CHILDHOOD FRIEND ALICE, HE TEAMS UP WITH KIRITO AND HEAD FOR THE CENTRAL CATHEDRAL.

「ALICE SCHUBERG... THAT IS, MY, NAME...? I DON'T RECALL ANYTHING AT ALL...」
ALICE SYNTHESIS THIRTY
§
THE GIRL EUGEO'S CHASING AFTER. THE SWORDSWOMAN OF <<GOLDEN TREE>>.
「YOUR REAL NAME IS ALICE SCHUBERG. AS YOU ARE RIGHT NOW, YOU'RE JUST <<ALICE IN NAME>>, CREATED BY ADMINISTRATOR.」
KIRITO
§
THE BOY WHO GOT LOST IN THE <<UNDERWORLD>>. TO ESCAPE, HE TEAMS UP WITH ALICE AND HEAD FOR THE TOPMOST FLOOR OF CENTRAL CATHEDRAL.

「I HAVE NOTHING MORE TO SAY TO YOU. LET OUR BATTLE BEGIN... THAT'S WHAT YOU LOT ARE HERE FOR, ISN'T IT?」


<<CENTRAL CATHEDRAL>>
THE PRIESTS, SENATE ANF DUTY PERSONNEL FOR CENTRAL CATHEDRAL MANAGEMENT LIVE IN THE MIDDLE LEVELS
100TH FLOOR
<<CENTRAL CATHEDRAL>>'S HIGHEST FLOOR. ADMINISTRATOR'S ROOM.
90TH FLOOR
<<LARGE BATHHOUSE>>
96-99TH FLOOR
<<CHAMBER OF ELDERS>>
95TH FLOOR
<<MORNING STAR LOOKOUT>>
80TH FLOOR
<<CLOUDTOP GARDEN>>
VS
ALICE SYNTHESIS THIRTY
ELEVATOR PLATE
50TH FLOOR
<<GRAND CLOISTER OF SPIRITUAL LIGHT>>
VS
FANATIO SYNTHESIS TWO
30TH FLOOR
<<DRAGON LANDING AREA>>
29TH FLOOR
SECTION
VS
LINEL SYNTHESIS TWENTY-EIGHT
FIZEL SYNTHESIS TWENTY-NINE
1ST FLOOR
WEST AREA
ROSE GARDEN
VS
ELDRIE SYNTHESIS THIRTY-ONE
3RD FLOOR
WEAPON'S VAULT
VS
DEUSOLBERT SYNTHESIS SEVEN
BACKDOOR
THE PRISON'S SPIRAL STAIRCASE
UNDERGROUND JAIL ROOM
BACKDOOR
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Afterword

Thanks to Tap for the Translation

Interlude IV
6th July AD 2026

There were twelve decks on the self-propelled mega-float that boasted an overall length of four hundred meters and a width of two hundred and fifty meters, the «Ocean Turtle».

Considering how Oasis of the Seas, the world's biggest cruise ship—though smaller than the Ocean Turtle, of course—could hold eighteen decks, it appeared to be a slightly extravagant use of space. However, it was not constructed for cruises, but for oceanographic research, and apparently needed specifications capable of fitting all sorts of observation and analysis machinery. Naturally, not even Asuna had any dissatisfaction over the ceiling's height.

The first floor from the waterline was the floating deck, the engine room took the second floor, while the third to eighth floors comprised of all kinds of research facilities, such as marine biology, deep-sea resources, and plate tectonics. The ninth and tenth floors held the cabins, the eleventh floor was the recreation deck with the lounge, gym, pool, and such, and aside from the radar and antenna installed on the final floor, the twelfth floor, it had an observation platform as well.

The ship belonged to the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology, that was merely half of the truth.

Aside from the link in utilizing a domestic pressurized water reactor, its construction was carried out in cooperation with the self-defense forces and its members were constantly aboard, actively guarding it even after its completion.

That wasn't all. The composite titanium pillar—nicknamed the «main shaft», stabbed through the hull's core was left completely under the self-defense forces' management and a top-secret research with absolutely no relation to the ocean was being carried out there. One that duplicated a newborn baby's soul, brought up a virtual world, and seemed to have given birth to the world's first bottom-up artificial intelligence—named the «Alicization Project».

6th July 2026, Monday, 7:45 AM.

Having paid a visit to Kirito—Kirigaya Kazuto, undergoing treatment in the upper half of the main shaft, called the «upper shaft», Yuuki Asuna had her breakfast at the eleventh deck's lounge with Koujiro Rinko, a researcher of fulldive technology.

She figured she had no room for complaints, seeing as she was no guest on some luxurious passenger ship—or rather, she would have been escorted to the detention barracks (though she didn't know if one existed) if not for the decision of Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka Seijirou, who supervised the project, but she had no choice but to admit the buffet-style meal was fairly splendidly done.

Rinko, who inserted a knife into a battered white fish on the other side of the table, spoke as she stared hard at the cross-section.

"I wonder if this fish was caught from the Ocean Turtle?"

"Wh-Who knows…"

Having taken the same onto her dish, Asuna timidly brought a small piece to her mouth. The tender white flesh shredded easily yet kept its mellow texture when chewed. She had no doubt it was reasonably fresh, but she had no idea if fish could actually be caught by throwing a rod into these open seas.

Putting down the knife in her right hand, Asuna turned her eyes towards the window on the left of the table while bringing up her glass of iced tea. The calm ocean surface was pitch-black, without a single fishing boat in sight, let alone fishes.

Now that she thought about it, Asuna hadn't heard anything about the Ocean Turtle's current location, aside from it being in the «sea near the Izu islands». Even if it was around the Izu islands, that was a long distance from north to south. If she recalled right, even Hachijyou Island near the middle was almost three hundred kilometers from Tokyo.

She could just start up a location application and display her current location on the portable terminal she brought from Tokyo if she could use it, but unfortunately, she didn't have permission to connect to the shipboard Wi-Fi due to security or something. She could play the music files and such stored in the local memory, so she felt lucky enough that it didn't get confiscated, but frustration certainly did accumulate when stuck in a situation incapable of doing an «instant search whenever a thought struck her». She didn't feel this disgruntled back in SAO, where she couldn't even get a single piece of news from the real world, let alone perform a search, though.

Gulping down her sigh along with the iced tea, Asuna thought to refresh her mood.

She only got this irritated at not being able to use the internet due to that lingering sensation that she wasn't kept in the loop enough.

Was the «project» Kikuoka Seijirou, Higa Takeru, and the rest worked on truly limited to those details they explained yesterday? Were there not still many concealed secrets hidden in the experimental world, «Underworld»? Also—would Kazuto, receiving treatment on the Soul TransLator number 4, awaken when tomorrow comes as Nurse Aki Natsuki had said…?

No, putting the first two aside, she had to cast off her doubts over the third. She could only believe entirely in it now. When tomorrow—7th July comes, Kazuto's damaged neural network will have been regenerated and he will regain consciousness. Asuna had no choice but to return to Tokyo via the helicopter departing from the Ocean Turtle on the seventh's evening, but there should be enough time to exchange some words. And the time for Asuna to firmly embrace the body that protected her.

Having regained some of her spirit by imagining that moment, Asuna continued eating while asking Rinko on the opposite side.

"Rinko-san, do you have any details on this ship's current location? I haven't heard anything more than it being in the sea near the Izu islands.

"…Now that you bring it up, I think I know as much as you…"

Having finished the battered fish, Rinko lightly tilted her head and put her hand into the pocket of her white robe. She appeared to be retrieving her portable terminal, but apparently recalled that she couldn't connect to the internet immediately after and faintly frowned.

"Erm, I believe Higa-kun mentioned that we were a hundred kilometers or two west of Mikura Island… or wait, was it Miyake Island…"

While voicing out those vague information, Rinko turned her eyes towards the window that was large for a ship. Asuna, too, gazed upon the blue-black sea surface once again.

The morning sun shone in from the opposite window, so the direction their two faces turned towards should be west. If the Ocean Turtle truly was west of the Izu islands presently, neither Mikura Island nor Miyako Island would be visible, much less Honshuu…

A soft “Ah” escaped from Asuna who gazed at the ocean from right to left with those thoughts in mind. She didn’t notice it when she looked at the window earlier, but it was shining white in the light from the morning sun. Something slender and man-made, floating in the distant sea—a ship. Grasping its scale was difficult without anything to compare it to, but it appeared rather large.

“Rinko-san, over there.”

Asuna placed the knife before pointing, making Rinko squint her eyes and nod.

“Oh, that’s a ship, isn’t it. Maybe the fishing vessel that caught the fishes earlier…… or not, it seems…”

“Eh, it’s not?”

It’s much too large for a fishing vessel and its color is plain too… besides, that’s an awfully lot of antennas.

Rinko left her seat and walked towards the window, so Asuna went to her side. Her eyesight couldn’t be said to be bad, but the faraway ship slowly swayed, blurring its details, perhaps due to the vapor spraying off the sea surface. However, there certainly was a great number of circular antennas installed on the mast towering at the ship’s center. Very much similar to the large antenna mast standing at the top of the Ocean Turtle, which would be right above this lounge. The ship’s frame had a linear design as well, so rather than a fishing vessel, it would be closer to a transport ship, no, instead…

“A warship…?”

The moment Asuna muttered so, a somber voice rang out from behind.

“That’s a Japanese vessel. Japan doesn’t own any warships.”

She turned back in sync with Rinko. The one who stood there holding onto breakfast with both hands was a man in a pure white uniform with short sleeves —Lieutenant Nakanishi.

“Morning, Nakanishi-san.”

“Good morning.”

When the pair greeted him, the tall Nakanishi conscientiously placed his tray on a nearby table before bowing his upper body and returning the greeting.

“Good morning, Professor Koujiro, Yuuki-san.”

“A chance like this is rare, so wouldn’t you have your meal at our table?”

He considered Rinko’s invitation for a little while before nodding with a “I’ll take you up on your offer, then”. Waiting until Nakanishi moved his tray, Asuna and Rinko then sat back at their original seats. Taking a look at the self-defense forces member’s breakfast portion, it was large as expected, with eggs, bacon, and salad heaped onto a large plate.

“How does the taste compare to meals at the self-defense forces?”

Nakanishi let out a slight strained laughter at Rinko’s considerably difficult question and spoke as he picked up his fork.

“Honestly speaking, the Ocean Turtle’s a little better, I suppose. And these tomatoes and cucumbers were even grown aboard the ship.”

“Wah, there’s a vegetable garden?”

The self-defense forces member showed a somewhat proud smile this time at Asuna who had her eyes opened wide.

“Yes, at the back of the eighth deck. I believe it was an experiment for large-scale agriculture on the sea, however.”

“I wonder if that’s what gave the tomatoes that slightly salty taste.”

And at that joke from Rinko,

“Really?”

Looking at Nakanishi, chewing the tomato wedges with a grave expression, Asuna and Rinko broke into laughter. Just as she took up her fork and knife to resume her interrupted meal, Asuna recalled Nakanishi’s first line from earlier and tilted her head.

Japan didn’t own any warships, he said, but that shouldn’t be the case. Wouldn’t his original workplace as a member of the maritime self-defense forces be on a warship… no, the self-defense forces weren’t an army, so the ships they owned wouldn’t be warships, or so logic would dictate, huh. In other words, the ship visible on the other side of the window would be…

Asuna turned her eyes towards the window once again and stared hard at the linear silhouette of the large ship as she spoke.

“Then, that’s… not a warship, but erm, a Japan defense ship…?”

“That’s close. Vessels belonging to the maritime self-defense forces are termed escort ships.”

Nakanishi gave a toothed smile, then turned his own eyes towards the faraway ship and continued.

“That ship is a newly manufactured destroyer, DD-127 «Nagato»*. As for why it cruises around this sea region, unfortunately, I am not at liberty to…… hmm…?”

His clear words cut off unnaturally and Asuna looked at Nakanishi’s face before she returned her sight to the sea.

When she did, the grey warship—no, escort ship just happened to start changing its direction. Turning its stern towards the Ocean Turtle in less than ten seconds, it continued off into the distance.

Having seen that, Nakanishi stood up without warning and turned his back to Asuna and Rinko, taking out a nondescript portable terminal from his pocket. Putting it to his ear in a nimble motion, he began speaking in a soft voice.

“Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka, I apologize for disturbing your rest, this is Nakanishi. However, regarding «Nagato», was it not supposed to be escorting this ship until 1200 the day after tomorrow… no, it changed course towards the west just a… yes, I’ll be immediately there.”

Finished with his phone call, he turned quickly around with the terminal held in his face. An abrupt rigid expression had plastered itself upon the self-defense forces member’s face.

“Professor, Yuuki-san, I apologize, but I’ll be excusing myself here.”

“Good luck with that. I’ll clear up the utensils for you.”

“I’ll accept your kind offer, then. Excuse me.”

Immediately after bowing in his upright posture at Rinko’s words, Nakanishi left the lounge at a speed close to running.

“…I wonder what was the matter?”

“Who knows…”

Tilting her head slightly, she took another look beyond the window.

Feeling a baseless, faint uneasiness while witnessing the escort ship disappear beyond the morning mist, Asuna gently clenched her left hand.

Chapter 9
Integrity Knight Alice
5th Month of Human World Calendar 380

Creak.

Creakk.

My heart flinched slightly each time that faint noise rang out.

The noise came from the tip of the «black sword» yet to be named. Somehow buried a cen into a tiny gap among the white marble blocks that built up the outer wall of the Axiom Church's Central Cathedral.

My right hand that grasped the black sword's grip was damp with sweat, with my elbow and shoulder joints unable to bear the weight, and threatening to let go even now. That was only natural—the weight of two humans, one longsword with super-high priority, and one set of armor were hanging off my right arm that couldn't even be considered muscular.

There weren't any handholds on the wall, as smooth as a mirror, and I couldn't stab the sword in any further. Below my body was nothing more than the never-ending empty sky. Moreover, my right hand, gripping onto the sword, wasn't all that was reaching its limit; the same went for my left hand that had a female knight clad in heavy golden armor hanging off it.

Physical fatigue in the alternate world, «Underworld», differed a little from its equivalent in the real world. Like reality, walking long distances, running with all your might, undergoing intense practice, or carrying heavy objects would tire one out, but the problem laid in how that fatigue was treated the same as injuries, reducing «Life»—the lives of Underworld dwellers, rendered into numerical values, essentially their hit points.

Dying from exhaustion probably hardly happened in the real world. Normally, one would be unable to keep up the activity that caused the fatigue before it could inflict any severe damage to the body. However, willpower breaks through physical limits at times in this world. To state an extreme example, even continuing to run while enduring fatigue and pain until one's Life hits zero, then collapsing and dying instantly in that moment would be possible.

I am currently supporting a ridiculous weight with nothing but my own body. Thus, my Life value must be reducing at a steady rate. Even if I continue tightly gripping my right and left hands with spirit and guts, my Life will eventually become zero and I will die. In all likelihood, this female knight will crash down onto the ground another few hundred meters below and die when my right hand leaves this sword in that instant.

In addition, I am not the only one receiving damage. My beloved sword, too, was supporting an enormous load beyond its limit with its tip alone. And that was after activating the extremely Life-draining «armament full control art» a whole two times in the battles thus far. I can't open up the Stacia window and check the value in this situation, but it wouldn't be strange at all for it to reach zero within several minutes. The sword would then break and couldn't be repaired simply by storing it in its sheath.

The sword would be too pitiful, breaking without its name even decided, and besides, I would have fallen onto the ground and died already. As such, I had to do something about this situation as soon as possible, but hanging on alone took up all of my strength and in addition to that—

"That's enough, release your hand!"

The woman dangling below me—the golden integrity knight holding onto the sacred tool, «Fragrant Olive Sword», Alice Synthesis Thirty, shouted out yet again.

"I have no intention of having my life saved by a major criminal like yourself and live in dishonor!"

While swaying her entire body in an attempt to extricate her gripped right hand. Damp with sweat in my hand, the gauntlet grew a little slippery.

"…Uooh… you…"

I somehow suppressed the swaying while incomprehensible sounds escaped from me. However, the tip of the black sword, dug into the wall, got drawn out by a mil by the shaking. I desperately regained a stable posture before glancing down and screaming out loud.

"Don't move, idiot! If you're supposed to be an integrity knight, then realize that nothing will be solved if you just give yourself up to despair here, idiot!"

"Wha…"

The white face that peeked out from under my feet quickly blushed red.

"And… and you dare to make a mockery of myself again! Retract that this instant, criminal!"

"Shut up! I'm calling you an idiot because you're an idiot, idiot! Idiooot!"

Unaware of whether I wanted to draw her into negotiations through provocation or if blood was just rushing up to my head, I cried out loud once more.

"Got it!? If you fall and die all by yourself here, Eugeo who's still left in the tower will go straight to the highest minister, you know! And yet, it's supposed to be your duty to prevent that! Then shouldn't it be most important for you to stay alive by all means now, as an integrity knight?! It's because you're an idiot who can't understand such a rationale; that's why I'm calling you an idiot!!"

"Kuh… s-so you even dare to voice out that humiliating insult eight times, don't you…"

Likely never been called an idiot ever since she woke up as an integrity knight, Alice's cheeks blushed and the corners of her eyes lifted in rage. The glistening Fragrant Olive Sword in her left hand lifted up a little and a chill ran through me, afraid that she might be thinking about cutting me and causing both of our deaths, but it seemed her reason scarcely surpassed her impulse, as the sword hung down powerlessly once again.

"…I see, your words do make sense. However…"

The integrity knight's teeth, much like pearl beads, gnashed firmly together and she rebutted.

"Then why will you not release that hand!? If the reason is not pity, against which I would find death more tolerable, how could you possibly prove it!?"

Pity—wasn't the reason. After all, the act of rescuing Alice itself was precisely half of the reason why Eugeo and I set this Central Cathedral as our aim.

However, I didn't have anywhere near enough time to leisurely explain that from the start. And before everything else, the one Eugeo wanted to help was technically not Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty, but his childhood friend who got kidnapped form Rulid Village eight years ago, Alice Schuberg.

I tried my hardest to rack my brain, almost overheating from the excess load, searching for any excuse at all that could satisfy Alice. But there was no way I could come up with such a thing on the spot. With things at this point, I had no choice but to state a part of the truth.

"I… Eugeo and I didn't climb the cathedral all this way because we wanted to destroy the Axiom Church."

Looking straight down at Alice's blue eyes, exuding an intense light, I frantically forced my words out.

"We're the same too, in how we want to protect the Human World from the Dark Territory's invasion. We even fought with a group of goblins in the mountain range at the edge two years ago… even if I say so, I guess you wouldn't believe me. That's why we can't have you, known as one of the strongest even among the integrity knights, die here. Your strength's essential."

It must have been outside of her expectations as Alice knitted her brows in silence, but immediately gave a barbed reply.

"Then for what reason have you swung that sword at another human and broke the worst taboo of making another shed blood?!"

The sentiment of genuine righteousness—even if that had been warped by the highest minister to suit her purposes—flared up and burnt in her two eyes as Alice shouted.

"For what reason have you hurt all of those knights, starting from Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one?!!"

There were unfortunately no words within myself to refute the girl's enquiry. In the end, though the lines I spoke to Alice about wanting to protect the Human World were my true feelings, they were also a great deceit at the same time.

If I reach the highest floor of the cathedral, then fight and win against the highest minister, Administrator, the hermit, Cardinal, would recover all of her authority. And it was likely that girl would try to reset the Underworld to its original state in order to prevent that disaster soon to come. I have absolutely no idea on how to avert the end where everything returns to null at the present moment.

However. If Alice and I were to both crash and die here, the tragedy befalling the world would be on an even larger scale.

With Cardinal still deprived from her authority, the «final load experiment phase»—the invasion from the Dark Territory in other words, will begin and the integrity knights Eugeo and I fought and injured would likely be crushed along with Administrator, with the humans massacred amidst their agony and sorrow without a single person remaining.

What I couldn't bear most was the fact that I would simply awaken inside a «Soul TransLator» somewhere in the real world even if I lost my life in this world. The Underworld people would die at the end of their hellish anguish while I return to the real world alone without a single injury— No matter what, I definitely cannot accept such a development.

"…I…"

I wonder what could I impart to the current Alice, a guardian of the church and order, even with all of this insignificant time I had left. But even if those words do not reach her, I have no means left aside from talking about that with all my heart.

"Eugeo and I slashed Raios Antinous and Humbert Zizek because the Axiom Church and the Taboo Index are flawed. Don't you understand that just as well deep down? The Taboo Index doesn't forbid it, so the upper class nobles can do as they please with girls that didn't even commit a single crime, like Ronye and Tiezé… do you honestly believe that's forgivable?!"

The scene I caught sight of two days ago in a room of the elite swordsmen-in-training dormitory—of Tiezé and Ronye who had their entire bodies mercilessly bound up, their cheeks damp with tears, came back to me in a flashback and my whole body shook violently. The sword point thrust into the wall creaked once again, but I shouted with hardly any care for that.

"What do you think! Answer me, integrity knight!!"

My raging emotions became a single tear that fell from the corner of my eye, hit Alice's forehead as she dangled below, and scattered. The golden knight drew in a sharp breath and opened her two eyes wide.

The voice that soon leaked out from her slightly trembling lips seemed to have lost much of its earlier rigidity.

"…The law, is the law… and crimes, are crimes. How could order be maintained if the masses are permitted to arbitrarily decide on them?"

“Exactly who’s to decide whether the one who made those laws, the highest minister, Administrator, is just or not? The gods of the Celestial World!? Then why haven’t I incurred divine punishment, getting hit by lightning and burnt to death right this moment!?”

“The gods—Stacia-sama’s plans are naturally made clear through the actions taken by us, her attendants!”

“Eugeo and I climbed all this way in order to make that clear! To defeat Administrator and prove that it is a mistake! And for that exact, same reason…”

I glanced upwards and confirmed that my beloved sword wedged in the wall was finally reaching its limit. The tip would break or slip the next time Alice moves, no, the next time the wind decides to send a gust this way and we will likely crash down together.

“…I can’t have you dying here!!”

Taking in a deep breath and putting it all into my abdomen, I gathered all of the energy I had left.

“—Uoooh!!”

All of my spirit surging out, I hauled up Alice who dangled off my left hand. A violent pain ran through the joints at my arms and shoulders, but I somehow brought Alice up to the same height, then shouted out with the rest of my strength.

“Get your sword through that seam…! I can’t hold on anymore, please!”

I stared hard at Alice’s much distorted face right beside me with a frantic look.

After an instant of silence, Alice moved her left arm and the Fragrant Olive Sword deeply stabbed its point into the gap between the marble with a sharp noise.

The black sword drew out from the stone wall’s seam at nearly the same time and my left hand separated itself from Alice’s hand as well, having lost its grip.

Amidst the panic shooting through me from head to toe, I fell down a long, long distance and «Death» approached me in the end within my mind for an instant.

However, what I actually felt were only a moment of weightlessness and a sudden shock. Alice's right hand that flashed like lightning seized my coat's collar from the back.

After affirming that Alice's sword and arms were firmly supporting both of our weight, I let out a deep breath. My heart, beating at the rate of an alarm clock, gradually slowed down and I finally felt at ease.

"……"

I looked up at the one with whom I had traded places with, both physically and mentally, in a mere one second in silence.

Appearing as though she was being tortured by the entire variety of contradictory emotions, the golden integrity knight had her teeth clenched together hard. Signs of the clenched hand holding me by the scruff of my neck slackening and tightening repeated over and over again right behind my neck.

I didn't know of anyone from the Underworld capable of hesitating in such a perilous situation aside from Eugeo. The rest of the humans—the artificial fluctlights were blindly loyal to their standards for good and evil, unfaltering over important choices. To say it in another manner, their important decisions were constantly made by something else, or someone else.

In other words, I could understand that a «humanity» exceeding many others from the Underworld hid itself in Integrity Knight Alice's psyche from this single incident. Especially so, considering the alterations the highest minister, Administrator, had committed on her soul.

I couldn't judge how much conflict there must be in Alice's mind. However, after several extremely long seconds, my body was easily pulled up to my previous height.

Unlike the girl, I had no need to hesitate. I immediately thrust the black sword into the marble's seam, even after all it had been through, and let out yet another deep breath.

The moment my stance stabilized, Alice drew back her right hand and even averted her face in a huff. Her voice, delivered by the wind, was feeble unlike its tone.

"…I wasn't helping you, I was merely returning the favor… besides, I have yet to reach the conclusion with your swords."

“I see… We’re equals with this now, then.”

Taking caution with my words, I moved my mouth.

“And so, I do have a proposal… as things stand, we have to return back into the tower at any cost. So, wouldn’t you consider a truce for the time being?”

“…A truce?”

I could sense a really suspicious look directed at me from her face, slightly inclined towards me.

“Yes. It’s no longer possible to break the cathedral’s outer wall and it’s no easy task to climb it either. Our survival rate should increase if the two of us work together, rather than going through it alone. Of course, things would be different if you have a convenient method to return inside.”

“……”

Alice chewed on her lips in chagrin but immediately replied in a murmur.

“…I would had used it already if I had such a method.”

“That’s true. So, can I consider you agreeable to the truce and cooperation?”

“Before that… you mentioned cooperation, but what exactly does that refer to?”

“Helping out each other if the other seems to be falling, just that. We could hold on better if we had a rope or something, but I suppose that’s asking for too much.”

Not looking at me any longer, the integrity knight sank into another long silence, but eventually nodded slightly in a nearly imperceptible motion.

“It is a reasonable proposal… I have to admit. There’s no helping it…”

As a replacement, Alice continued while giving me one final glare.

“I will cut you the instant we return into the tower. Be certain not to forget that one point.”

“…I’ll keep that in mind.”

Nodding once more to my reply, Alice cleared her throat as though to shift her thoughts.

"Well then… you required a rope? Are you not holding on to any unnecessary cloth?"

"Cloth…"

I looked down at my body, but thinking about it, I didn't even have a single handkerchief in my pockets. I could have taken out piles of spare clothes or mantles from my storage if this was the Alfheim I dearly missed, unfortunately, that convenient function didn't exist in the Underworld.

"…Even if you ask, there's nothing more than this shirt and these trousers. I'll strip if I need to, though."

When I shrugged only my left shoulder as I replied, Alice made her most profound grimace yet and shouted.

"We will not stoop to that! …Goodness, it's shocking how you thought to go into battle with merely a sword on you."

"Hey, hey, the one who rounded up Eugeo and me from the Sword Mastery Academy with only the clothes on our back was you, wasn't it?"

"And you broke into the cathedral's armory after that, haven't you. There should have been bundles of high quality rope over… aah, that's it, this is a waste of time."

Alice flicked her head away with a hmph and raised her right arm clad in a golden gauntlet. But she apparently realized she couldn't take her left hand off her sword's grip there, as she scowled. Jerking her arm in front of me, she ordered.

"Unfasten my gauntlet with your free hand."

"Hah?"

"And pay extra attention to not touch my skin. Hurry up!"

"……"

According to Eugeo's recollections, Alice was apparently a cheerful and energetic girl, more gentle than anyone else, when she lived in Rulid. If that was the case, where exactly did her current personality that seemed the polar opposite sprout out from?

While thinking about such things, I brought up my left hand that finally regained its sense of touch, then unfastened the gauntlet's clasp. Alice, who made me hold onto the gauntlet, quickly pulled out her right hand and brandished her pale, slender fingers while shouting out.

"*System call!*"

Following the opening phrase for sacred arts, she rapidly chanted an unfamiliar, complex art. The gauntlet in my hand let out a dazzling light and its shape began to change at a noticeable rate. Within mere seconds, my left hand held a neatly bundled golden chain.

"Uooh… transmutation…?"

"Were you not listening? Or perhaps those aren't ears on the side of your face, but holes infested with insects? That was merely transformation of its form, arts capable of changing the properties of its material cannot be used by anyone aside from the esteemed highest minister."

Upon apologizing with a "sorry" to Alice, who apparently had no intention to change her sharp tongue even after consenting to the cease-fire agreement, I tested the chain's toughness. My teeth felt like they were going to fall out when I held its end in my mouth and pulled, so I relaxed my mouth in a fluster. I had no qualms, since it seemed to be tough enough despite being thinner than a little finger and even had sturdy-looking clasps at both ends to boot.

Firmly fastening one end to my belt, I offered the other end and Alice took it with a tug and kept it into her sword belt's metal fittings. The length of the dangling chain was about five meters. For the time being, we should be more or less safe even if our hands slip, unless we both fall.

"Now then…"

Scanning the surrounding again, I confirmed the situation we were in.

Judging from the direction of the sun, we were dangling on the Central Cathedral's west wall. The sky overhead was in the midst of turning from blue to violet with the sun coming from behind dying the tower's white wall a bright orange. Guess the current time was around three in the afternoon.

Hesitantly gazing downwards towards my feet, I could see pale, hovering clouds passing by, the miniature-like garden, the stone walls encompassing that, and even the streets of Central Centoria split into four by the «immortal walls», making me ascertain just how ridiculously tall the cathedral was once again.

Each floor of the tower should be around six meters, inclusive of the floor's thickness, so the eightieth floor, «Cloudtop Garden», where I fought with Alice would be at a relative height of four hundred and eighty meters—no, adding on fiftieth floor, «Grand Cloister of Spiritual Light», with its abnormally high ceiling, about five hundred meters, huh. Our Lives would definitely vanish in an instant if we fall. In addition, this body would turn into fine dirt without even leaving a corpse behind, probably. The wind was calm now, but I didn't know how long that would last.

My back shuddered before I gripped my sword again with my right hand and wiped the sweat running over my left palm on my trousers.

"Ermm… just checking, but…"

Alice, also peeking at her feet beside me, raised her face when I called out. It might just be my imagination how her complexion seemed worse than earlier, but her tone was curt as always.

"What?"

"No, well… I thought a grand knight like yourself, capable of using advanced sacred arts like changing the form of objects would know some art for flight… or not, huh, sorry."

Despite my prompt apology at her sharply raising eyebrows, Alice berated me without mercy.

"Just what did you learn in the academy? Even the youngest ascetic apprentice would know that the only person capable of flight arts in the vast Human World is the esteemed highest minister!"

"That's why I said 'just checking', right?! You don't have to get that angry!"

"It's due to that strangely insulting way you put it!"

It gradually appeared clear that this Integrity Knight Alice's personality had a conclusively horrible affinity with me, without even considering our respective standpoints, but I continued my questions while restraining the urge to retort.

"…Then, I'm just checking this time too, but… how about calling for that huge flying dragon I hung off all the way here?"

"Your suggestions are becoming increasingly foolish. Approaching any flying dragons is only permitted on the thirtieth floor's landing platform. No ridden dragon will go close to any higher, not even oji-sama… no, not even the Knight Commander's."

"Th-There's no way I would know of an arrangement like that, right?!"

"You should have realized it when you knew the flying dragon landing platform was built on the thirtieth floor!"

I had no idea how many times had we done so already, but we glared at each other for another three whole seconds before I swallowed down the anger directed at the great integrity knight's irrational remark and turned my head back, speaking.

"…Then there goes the path of escaping by flying… I guess."

Alice, on the other hand, seemed to have taken another two seconds before she regained her cool, but her blue eyes glanced this way and she nodded.

"Not even birds approach the upper floors of the cathedral. I do not know the specifics, but I have heard a unique art wrought by the highest minister's hand is at work."

"So that's it… that's meticulous."

I surveyed the surrounding again, then saw that although there were bird-like silhouettes extremely far away, they certainly showed no sign of approaching. This could be said to be the embodiment of the transcendental magic ability and unhealthy wariness of the most influential being, Administrator. On that line of thought, the abnormal height of this tower, too, seemed to be a symbol of her authority while being an expression of fear towards unseen enemies.

"In that case, there are three choices remaining… to descend, to ascend, or to break through the wall again, huh."

"The third will likely be difficult. Like the «immortal walls», the cathedral's outer walls should endowed with practically infinite Life and the nature to repair themselves. The same applies to the glass on the lower floors."

"Then, that makes descending to the windows pointless too, huh…"

When I muttered so, Alice lightly nodded before she spoke.

"…In the first place, I find it hard to believe a hole could have opened up in the wall from within the tower earlier… there is no way to think about it aside from it being an one-in-a-million stroke of misfortune caused by that abnormal power released when our armament full control arts combined. My goodness, what a meaningless deed you've done."

"……"

We would get into a spiral of quarrels if I retort here, I thought as I held it in, getting it to settle down after merely heavy breathing, before I asked.

"…But in that case, wouldn't it be logical for the wall to break if we bring about that same phenomenon again?"

"The probability is not a complete zero, but… it would be difficult to return inside in the few seconds before the hole automatically repairs and there's one more thing to note, that I have already used this child's… this «Fragrant Olive Sword»'s full control art twice. I cannot use the art unless I allow it to bask in plenty of sunlight or let it rest in its scabbard."

"That's true, it's the same for me. I'll have to put it in my sheath… or rather, there's quite a lot of stress being placed on it just by dangling like this, right? It's best to get a move on soon, regardless of whether we're descending or ascending."

I tried feeling over the marble wall with my left hand as I spoke, but the number of bumps and dips was a hopeless nil. Blocks, with sides of roughly two meters at least, piled on forever neatly, without even a window visible on this west side. Breaking it apparently wouldn't be possible either, even if there was one, according to Alice.

As for a method for moving across the wall, there probably weren't any aside from preparing something like a *piton*[1] used in rock climbing and driving that into the seams between the marble. There wasn't any great difference in effort between ascending or descending, so I would rather set the floors above as my goal, but the problem with that would be that—

I stared at Alice on my left with the most serious expression I could muster and asked, resigned to the low chance of getting a reply.

“If we were to head upwards… is there somewhere we can return into the tower from?”

Alice showed a hesitating expression as expected and chewed on her lips at that. If we could enter the tower by climbing, that would indeed be extremely close to the highest floor where Administrator resides. Guiding an enemy of the church to such a place would be nearly the same as committing a taboo as an integrity knight, a guardian.

However—

Alice drew in a deep breath, then put strength into her gaze and nodded.

“There is. On the ninety-fifth floor, a place called the «Morning Star Lookout», should be entirely see-through, with only pillars for its four walls. We should be able to easily return inside if we could climb up there. …However.”

A remarkably strong gleam resided in her two blue eyes.

“Even if we reach the ninety-fifth floor, I will cut you there without fail.”

Taking on the integrity knight’s gaze, filled with enough resolve to cause a prickly numbness on my nape, head-on, I nodded in return.

“That’s our agreement from the start, after all. Well—you’re okay with climbing the wall, then?”

“…Very well. It is more pragmatic than descending to the ground from here. However… despite how assuredly you said it, how do you intend on climbing this vertical wall?”

“Well, obviously, we’re going to run vertically… no, that’s a joke.”

After clearing my throat in a bid to escape Alice’s glance that had rapidly froze down to below absolute zero, I swapped my sword to my left hand, held out my right palm, and chanted an art.

“*System call! Generate metallic element!*“

A metallic element, shining like mercury, was instantly created, so I altered its form with a supplement art and the power of my imagination. Pulling it out to a length of around fifty centimeters and sharpening its point to the shape of a thin blade, I made an impromptu large piton which I firmly held onto.

Looking up at the stone seam my black sword was thrust into overhead, I swung my right hand with force.

"Hmph!"

Upon driving in the piton with as much strength as I could muster, fortunately, the blade portion stabbed into the narrow gap without breaking. I tried to pry it out, upwards and downwards, but it seemed like it would stay fixed without issue even if my body weight hung off it.

The Lives of objects created through sacred arts were exceedingly low, vanishing in a few hours even when left alone. Hence, the lifeline connecting Alice and myself wasn't used in the end, but it would suffice if it was strong enough to support us as we climbed the wall.

While sensing Alice's usual suspicious look, I firmly gripped the piton with my right hand and drew my black sword that had been abused to its limit with my left. I stored that into the sheath on my waist, then dangled off the piton extruding around forty centimeters from the wall with both hands and treated it as a horizontal bar as I did a kip[2].

Although my physical ability in the Underworld didn't reach mine at the end of the SAO period that would make a B movie's ninja ashamed, it still far more nimble, yet brawny, when compared to the real world. Placing my right foot on the bar, I steadily placed my left hand onto the wall while lifting my body up in a single stroke and succeeded in standing atop the thin, metallic rod.

"Are… are you all right?"

After lowering my sight at that hoarse voice, I saw Alice gripping tightly onto the golden chain with her free hand and looking up at me with a somewhat pale face. That expression gave off an unexpectedly childish impression and made me want to pretend I was falling against my better judgement, but killed that thought, knowing this wasn't the place for it.

"I'm fine… I think."

Casually giving a signal with my right hand, I chanted the art again and brought forth a new piton. Driving it into the next gap I could see overhead with plenty of strength, I climbed up with the same process as earlier. While embracing a modest sense of accomplishment over finally advancing, though it was merely two meters, I called out to Alice below.

“Alright, looks like it works! Like what I did, come up that first *piton*… no, that metal rod.”

However, the integrity knight remained still while looking up at me. Her lips made a small movement before long and a faint voice reached me.

“…an’t.”

“Hah? What did you say?”

“…I can’t, that’s what!”

“No… no, you can. With that strength of yours, pulling your own body up would be…”

“That’s not what I meant!”

Alice strongly shook her head and repelled the encouragement I crudely gave her.

“…As it is my first time stuck in such a situation… i-it might be a disgrace, but it’s already taking everything I have to hang off like this. An unspeakable act like climbing onto that thin foothold would simply…”

I was briefly rendered speechless at Alice’s fragile voice that again seemed as though it would vanish.

In general, the people of the Underworld tended to react poorly towards situation beyond their expectations or common sense. Their adaptability towards «originally impossible circumstances» was especially low, with extreme cases like the elite swordsman-in-training, Raios, whose two arms were severed by my sword, getting his fluctlight crumbling away his Life extinguished—or so I conjectured.

I suppose not even an integrity knight should be capable of dealing with this situation of getting hurled out into the empty skies from a huge hole opened up in the tower’s wall, that should have been unbreakable, and stuck dangling from a super high area without a single foothold where even flying dragons did not trespass. Or possibly—Alice Synthesis Thirty, who boasts of boundless skill with the sword, was just a single girl at heart too.

Whichever it was, hearing this proud integrity knight plea for help would probably be strictly restricted to a situation like right now. Having judged that, I shouted.

"Got it! I'll pull you up to the foothold with the chain, then!"

Alice chewed on her lips with a look that appeared like she was weighing her pride against her fear when I did, but apparently had no intention of reversing her previous order of priorities as she gripped the golden chain with a very mild nod.

"…I'll be in your hands."

While enduring the impulsive urge to tease her incensed by her nearly mute voice, I caught hold of the chain as well.

"Right, I'll lift you up slowly, then. Here I go."

I cautiously pulled up the chain after that single line. My foothold, the piton, creaked softly, but it seemed it could bear the weight of two if it was for a short time. Taking care not to jolt it, I lifted the great golden knight a meter before holding the chain still for the moment.

"…Alright, you can pull your sword out now."

Alice nodded and delicately extracted her Fragrant Olive Sword from the stone wall it had been thrust into. The chain weighed down anew in that instant, but I kept it under control somehow.

Upon confirming she had sheathed her sword, I continued pulling up. I called out once more after Alice's boots got onto the first piton.

"Hold onto the wall with both hands… yeah, alright, I'll be letting the chain go."

I couldn't see her expression from this angle, but Alice desperately tried to stick onto the wall and haphazardly shook her head. While imagining her expression likely present below her golden hair, fluttering in the wind, I gently lowered my right arm. The knight ended up reeling a little atop the thin piton, but immediately regained her balance.

"Whew…"

I let a deep breath escape.

I had no idea how many meters away was that «Morning Star Lookout» place, said to be on the ninety-fifth floor, but anyway, we should eventually reach there if I repeated this process. The problem would be how it would likely turn night before we got there, at the rate we climbed a single block, so we should get mentally prepared to settle down for the night while dangling off the wall.

"I'll be climbing up another, then."

After I declared downwards, Alice glanced up with a rigid face and replied with a barely audible whisper mostly swept into the noise from the wind.

"…Please be careful."

"Got it."

I made a distinct thumbs-up with my right hand—though that gesture wasn't used in the Underworld—then chanted the system command to create a third piton.

Despite how Centoria should have been closing in to midsummer, the sun mercilessly sank quicker and quicker once it got started.

The white wall glowing with the setting sun's orange shifted through a fiery vermillion, then violet, before it settled on indigo, and I could see the mountain range at the edge cutting a lonely horizontal line far-away in the west when I swept through with a glance.

A multitude of stars had already been flickering into existence overhead, but our climbing progress was by no means fast. An unforeseen limit in the system had been tormenting us since an hour ago or so.

Scaling up had been simple indeed. Creating a single piton with sacred arts, securing that in the gap between the marble blocks, and clambering atop it. Followed by pulling Alice up by the chain and placing her onto the piton I stood on earlier; that was all to it. Each set was reduced to below three minutes after repeating it over ten times.

However, the problem laid with creating that crucial piton.

This world had no equivalent for that parameter called 'mana points' in ALO. Any variant of the magic here, named 'sacred arts', could be repeatedly used without cease, as long as the user's system access authority qualified for it.

However, that didn’t mean that it could be used infinitely, anywhere and anytime. The rule of this world, that each and every act of creation required resources, applied just as strictly to sacred arts. Usage of the arts must consume precious catalysts, the Lives for living beings, even humans, or the «space resources» stored around the user.

This space resources thing had no numerical value to go by and was truly a troublesome matter to deal with. Basically, it was supplied through the sunlight or the fertility in soil. A place with fertile soil and basking in sufficient sunlight would be rich in sources, enough for even continuous casts of advanced sacred arts, but on the other hand, space resources would be rapidly depleted in the room the sun cannot reach, of a building made from stone, requiring a long period of time before the resources would be recharged.

And abiding by the rule, Alice’s and my present circumstances—stuck five hundred meters above the ground and the sun sinking into the horizon, were close to the worst possible conditions. To sum it up, the surrounding resources would be exhausted by the sacred arts I had repeatedly chanted and we would fail in creating those indispensable pitons for scaling the wall.

“*System call! Generate metallic element!*”

Atop my palm, stretched out straight and seeking the dim afterglow remaining, drifted desolate beads of silver light which vanished in a puff of smoke.

I sighed and Alice spoke in a voice just as worn-out from two meters below.

“…Creation of those apparatus must have greatly drained the sacred power in the area… We could even consider ourselves lucky if we could create one every hour after Solus sets… —How much have we climbed thus far?”

“Erm… I’m pretty sure we’re almost done with the eighty-fifth floor.”

“It is still far until the ninety-fifth floor, isn’t it.”

I stubbornly gazed at the vanishing shade of violet in the skies, then nodded.

“Yeah… one way or another, it’ll be too dangerous to climb when it’s completely dark. Still… we can’t exactly rest in this situation even if we were to settle down for the night…”

If worst comes to worst, we would have to rest while dangling off the chain, but with how we couldn't make any pitons and how they vanish after tens of minutes, we could only resort to our swords again as the support. But it was questionable if our swords' Lives could even hold until morning.

In hope that I could find something to hang the chain upon, like some protrusion, I glared at the wall overhead, unwilling to give up. And—

"Ah…"

There were elaborate silhouettes sticking out from the wall, spaced out regularly, just around eight meters above, weren't there. It appeared the mist coiling around the tower disappeared upon sunset and revealed the hidden objects' visages.

"Hey, over there… do you see something?"

After I shouted out while pointing, Alice, near my feet, raised her face as well. Her blue eyes squinted and she answered.

"I do… could those be statues or something similar? That said, why would they be at such a high… There wouldn't be anyone around to look at them."

"It doesn't matter what they are as long as we can sit on them and rest. Still, there are still eight *met*… eight mel before reaching there. I could climb up there, but I guess I'll need another three metal rods…"

"Three… I see."

Alice could be seen pondering for a moment before she immediately nodded.

"Understood. I had planned to save this until it truly came in necessary, but… it appears now would be the time."

She leaned against the wall the moment she said thusly and removed the gauntlet equipped on her left hand. Staring at the armor that radiated a faint, golden light even in this shadowy darkness, she chanted the starting phrase for sacred arts.

A fleeting flash of light shot out as the chant, done several times more fluent than I could have, ended—the gauntlet had already changed its form into three pitons before I could process that. Perhaps Alice's form transformation art had been more cost-effective than element generation arts, for it bore fruit even in our surroundings' scantiness of resources.

“Do use these.”

Alice fully extended her right hand, gripping onto the pitons, towards me who was two meters higher. I leaned my body over the foothold and received those precious tools with caution.

“Thanks, those’ll help.”

“Should the need arise, I do have some armor remaining, but…”

I gave the gorgeous breastplate covering Alice’s upper half a glance and shook my head.

“No… let’s keep that in reserve until the very end. Never know when we might need it…”

Slowly standing up, I stuck two among the three pitons Alice made for me into my belt and firmly gripped the last one.

“Uryaa!”

The golden stake I drove in with a shout pierced deep into the gap with an entirely different level of tenacity compared to the ones made from metallic elements as expected. Climbing atop it via the horizontal bar exercise I’d gotten rather used to, I pulled Alice up with the lifeline.

Repeating that process yet another time, I could clearly recognize that mysterious object even in the dim light upon getting within four meters of it.

It really was a stone statue. A narrow terrace stretched out left and right, as if surrounding the cathedral’s outer walls, and several quite large statues lined up atop that.

However, those were no divine figures like the goddesses and angels I’d seen countless times within the tower.

They were shaped like humans, but their posture, with their legs crooked in a squat and their arms folded onto their laps, had no association with chasteness. Rugged, boorish muscles bulged on their limbs and wings, sharp as knives, extended from their backs.

And the statues’ heads could be described as nothing other than grotesque. A rounded mouth was carved into its front at the end of a long arc. Their heads alone bore a close resemblance to weevils or something similar.

“Ugh… that’s one gross design.

I muttered;

“Eh…!? Th-Those are… the Dark Territory’s…!”

and Alice let a surprised voice escape before that moment.

The crouching stone statue directly above me swayed its head left and right, and its circular mouth, that brought lampreys to mind, opened and shut bit by bit. It was no mere ornament carved from stone. That was—living.

If this was a quest set up in a VRMMO game in the real world, this was naturally the scene of an assault.

However, in this case, the scenario writer must have had quite a sadistic streak or was a complete novice. After all, we, the players, were on top of pitons that extruded less than even a mere forty centimeters from this perpendicular wall and couldn’t take a single step.

An unwinnable event—those useless words scrolled through my mind, but immediately shook them off. I had absolutely no hope for the development of some person dashingly saving us even if we were to fall. We would have to rack our brains and avert this crisis with our own strength. Otherwise, both Alice and I would die.

As I steeled my resolve, the winged stone statue began to change the tint of its entire body while trembling. Its skin, originally grayish-white like the wall, started changing into a viscous coal color from its tip.

Basaa! Without waiting for its black wings that caused that loud noise as they stretched out, I drew my sword from my waist. With my sight trained onto the winged monster, formerly a stone statue, I called out to Alice two meters below.

“Looks like we’ll have to fight here. Prioritize not falling over everything else!”

However, I didn’t hear any immediate reply from the integrity knight. Upon taking a brief glance below, I saw nothing show up on Alice’s pale face, standing out in the twilight, except astonishment. How could it be, why are those—that murmur reached my ears via the updraft.

Why was the integrity knight, who should have known everything about the Axiom Church, this shocked? I knew nothing more than hearsay, but the highest minister, Administrator, apparently had a predisposition towards vigilance to an eccentric extent. It wouldn't very much of a surprise for her to deploy guardians to repel intruders forcibly climbing the walls, not gaining enough calm of mind by simply setting the upper portion of the tower as an area beyond flight.

That guardian—a monster that resembled the «gargoyles» that frequently appeared in games of the real world, if ignoring its head, grasped the terrace's edge with its clawed hands, then expelled air from its circular mouth with a loud "bushuu". I noticed the gargoyles on the left and right of the first one that began moving were changing in body color as well, making me shiver. If those were to be stationed across all four sides of the cathedral's outer walls, it wouldn't be strange if their total numbers exceed a hundred.

"Dammit…!"

After turning my body while cursing, I brandished my sword with my back leaned onto the wall, which already made me lose much of my balance. Well, my foothold was only a single, thin metal rod. I had no experience of fighting in such conditions, even when considering my old SAO days.

What do we do—I heard the flapping noise of wings without even given the time to ponder on that thought. I looked up and there the gargoyle hovering with the dark blue skies as its backdrop was, glaring at me with the round eyeballs attached to the sides of its long and narrow head.

The monster was large beyond expectations, likely close to two meters, from head to toe. In addition, its tail with a length close to its body was languidly stretching out from behind its waist.

"Bushaa!!"

I stared fixedly at the gargoyle that let out a bizarre voice like steam escaping a valve and closed in with a backwards nose dive. Fortunately, it didn't seem to possess long range attack potential, so its attack should be any of its four clawed limbs. Right, left, up, or down—

"—Uoohh!?"

What soared this way while growling like a whip was its tail with the tip sharpened to a knife-like point. Caught completely unguarded, I screamed while twisting my head. The sharp pointed end made a shallow tear in my cheek, but I somehow avoided a direct hit.

However, with my balance lost from that excessive motion, my body lurched atop the piton.

Targeting me, desperately trying to brace myself, the gargoyle still hovering before my eyes thrust its tail forth continuously.

I supported my body with my left hand and guarded the tail attacks with the sword in my right, but it took my all just to raise it as a shield's substitute. I didn't have the composure to swing my sword and sever the tail at all.

"Kuh…"

I concluded this was no situation to hesitate and took my left hand off the wall, then pulled out one of the pitons stuffed in my belt. While making a mental image of the throwing skill's motion I trained back in SAO, I threw it with the gargoyle's core as my target.

I hadn't put that much strength into it, but it appeared the piton made from Alice's gauntlet possessed quite a high priority as the short javelin drew a golden arc in the dim light, stabbing deep into the gargoyle's abdomen.

"Bushii!"

Dusky blood spewed out from its round mouth and scattered, and the monster unsteadily flapped its wings, taking a higher position. It seems to have dealt a moderate amount of damage, but unfortunately, that was not enough to make it retreat. A hint of rage mixed into its pitch-black simple eyes, heavily resembling those of insects, and the gargoyle glared at me.

I understood this wasn't the time for it, but the thought unconsciously came to me at a corner of my mind. Was it a program manipulating that grotesque monster? Or perhaps, that, too, was an artificial fluctlight like the people of the Underworld…?

“Bushuuuu!!”

The new, strange cry threw my thoughts into disarray. Two new gargoyles leapt off the terrace and were flying around in circles as though they were awaiting a gap in my guard.

“Alice! Draw your sword, those monsters are going for you too!”

I glanced straight down while crying out, but the knight apparently had yet to recover from her distress of unknown origin. She would either be skewered on a tail or fall off the piton if she were to get attacked as she was now.

Should I climb up to the terrace four meters above while the gargoyles observe the situation? However, there was only one piton left in my belt. It would probably be impossible to ask that enraged gargoyle to return the one stabbed in its stomach.

Perhaps the three monstrosities trying to intimidate me with their strange spewing noises had finally decided to resume their offensive, but noticeably shrill screams surged out from them.

Now that it had come to this, I could only remove the lifeline and jump at any enemies targeting Alice.

Thinking thusly, I searched for the chain connected to my waist with my left hand. And my two eyes opened wide with realization.

The chain was approximately five meters long. The terrace overhead was four meters—

“Alice… Alice!!”

While sheathing my sword, I shouted as loud as I could.

The integrity knight’s body trembled with a start and those blue eyes finally looked in this direction.

“Grip onto the chain tightly!!”

Just what are you thinking; Alice frowned as I grasped the chain attached to her sword belt with both hands. I pulled it hard and Alice’s body floated off the foothold. Catching hold of the chain in a fluster, the knight let a hoarse voice escape.

"…Don't tell me you…"

"I'll apologize as much as you want if we both live through this!!"

Inhaling a deep breath, I mustered all my strength and pulled up the chain, that the magnificent knight was dangling off, with it—no, I flung it straight up. Her golden, long hair and pure white skirt fluttering, Alice soared while following the trajectory of a semi-circle.

"Kyaaaaa!!"

A surprisingly girlish shriek rang out as the integrity knight passed in between the gargoyles and landed on the terrace four meters above. To put it more accurately, perhaps I should instead say that she crashed. Maybe I should take it as if I hadn't heard that "mugyuu", unappropriate for a cultivated female knight, that came before the shriek ended.

My body was thrown off the piton, my foothold, by the recoil from the overly drastic throw. If Alice didn't support me from the terrace above, we would both be diving down to the ground far below.

As expected, my courage froze over immediately after falling, but the integrity knight responded to my hope, getting up on the narrow terrace and holding the chain with both hands. Her two legs stood firmly and stopped my descent before

"You… uuuuu!!"

She pulled on the chain with all her strength while shouting out in a voice filled with anger.

Soaring through the air like Alice did earlier, I had the air knocked out of me the moment my back crashed into the marble wall, but nothing felt more reliable than this terrace I groveled upon now. I wanted to throw myself down on this nostalgic horizontal surface forever, but Alice kicked my flank and I reluctantly lifted my body.

"Wha… what were you thinking, you great fool!!"

"It's not like I could help it, I could only… no, leave the talking for later, they're coming!"

I drew my sword again and pointed its end at the three gargoyles in their sharp ascent.

Making use of the meager time before launching into battle to check the surrounding terrain, I briefly swept my sight left and right.

The terrace we clambered onto through a circus-like stunt had a width of roughly one meter. It lacked decorative features, being nothing more than a simple marble platform jutting out vertically from the tower's outer walls. No, it probably wasn't anything more or less than a shelf. It was something solely meant for the practical use of setting the gargoyles on it.

Alice didn't know about the existence of this terrace, so I held a minor hope that a door or window might be set in the outer wall behind us, but unfortunately, there wasn't a single opening. All I could see was the view of the silhouettes of the monstrosities yet to come alive lined up in a row until the far-away corner. Knowledge of their numbers from the repeated affirmation inspired fear, but fortunately, the only ones moving seemed to be the three that could be seen flying high.

Perhaps she finally got a hold of herself after securing a reliable foothold, but Alice, too, slipped her Fragrant Olive Sword out from its scabbard with a "shing". However, the doubts in her heart apparently hadn't been resolved yet as a hoarse murmur reached my ears.

"…There is no mistaking it… Why… would they be in…"

The gargoyles that ascended to the same altitude as the terrace might have been wary towards the two brandished swords, as they showed no sign of swooping in immediately. While gazing at the monsters, lazily swaying in midair, I asked Alice a question.

"Something's been bothering me since earlier. You know about those monsters?"

"…Yes, I do."

Surprisingly enough, Alice immediately replied in the affirmative.

"Those are made by the darkness arts magicians of the Dark Territory, the wicked demons they employ. Following their example, we call them «*minions*». I believe that is Sacred Tongue for «underlings» or «subordinates»."

"*Minions*… I can agree that they're from the Dark Territory, judging from their appearance, but why would something like those be lined up along the entire wall of the most sacred place in the Human World?"

"That is what I would like to know!"

Screaming that as though she was wringing the words out, Alice tightly bit on her lips.

"…I understand this would never happen without you telling me. I can hardly imagine that *minions* could slip through the integrity knights' observation and cross the mountain range at the edge, trespassing all the way to the capital… and to such a high location on the Central Cathedral too. Let alone…"

"Let alone someone of high authority in the church intentionally setting them here… an act that would be definitely impossible…?"

Alice scowled at me, half-consciously filling in the words cut short, but made no attempt to rebut. Returning my sight to the three gargoyles, the *minions*, who were still hovering, I questioned once again.

"Tell me one more thing. Do those *minions* possess intelligence? Do they talk like humans?"

Alice, who returned her sight to the front as well, appeared to have shaken her head quickly.

"That would be truly impossible. Unlike the goblins and orcs living in the land of darkness, the *minions* are not alive. They are soulless familiars created from lumps of earth by the magicians serving the god of darkness, Vector… they only understand some simple orders from their masters."

"…I see."

I hid a soft, relieved breath from Alice.

I was well enough aware that this was nothing more than postponing the problem at hand, but I still feel a strong hesitation against killing existences possessing the same fluctlights as humans, even now.

Babies in this world are born between only male-female couples who became married with recognition from the Axiom Church—a system command exclusive for that likely exists—or so the recluse, Cardinal, had said. Those who dwell in the Dark Territory were no exception. In that case, *minions* created by the not-sacred-arts darkness arts would not possess fluctlights, but programmed code like wild animals.

Looking at it from that perspective, the hostility emitting from the *minions*' insect-like simple eyes had the distinct digital stench common to the mobs of monsters I fought back in SAO. Their status might have switched from «watch on» to «attack», as the three beat their wings strongly simultaneously and soared up high.

"—They're coming!"

I shouted and brandished my beloved sword once again. The one who flew in straight away was the one with a golden piton still stabbed into its abdomen, perhaps due to the hate earned earlier.

This time, the claws on its two arms made a consecutive assault instead of its tail. It couldn't be said to be fast, but I had difficulty getting the right timing, being in a fight against monsters for the first time in a while. Devoting myself to repelling the claws with my sword, I awaited an opportunity, then saw a fleeting image of the unhurt pair rapidly descending onto Alice on my left in a corner of my vision.

"Pay attention, there're two of them!"

Despite my warning, made in genuine worry for the female knight, the voice that came back was utterly indifferent.

"Who exactly do you think I am?"

Nimbly lowering her waist, she brandished her Fragrant Olive Sword flat on her left.

Dobaa! With that tremendously hefty slashing sound, the golden shimmer from her sword flash brightly enough to blind even in the dim light.

A single, mere middle slash without feints or linked techniques—it was what would be called a basic technique in the «Aincrad style», «Horizontal». However, its speed and weight were enough to make cold sweat gush out from me just by gazing at it from the side. What cornered me without difficulty in that battle on the eightieth floor was the overwhelming degree of completeness in that single strike that forgave neither evasion nor defense. It was a might that easily pulverized my belief in the excellence of consecutive hit skills that I held throughout my long years of living in VRMMOs.

Before Alice, still after having swung her sword, the four arms of the two *minions* fell. Following that, despite how they should have been beyond her reach, their torsos split apart around their chests without a sound.

Dusky blood heartily spewed out from the monsters that crashed without letting out a single scream. Naturally, not a single drop came into contact with Alice.

The integrity knight who roused her body as though nothing had actually happened turned to me, still stuck in a one-sided defensive battle, and spoke in a vaguely sarcastic tone.

"Would you require any assistance?"

"…N-No thank you."

After politely refuting her proposal with the minimal of obstinacy, I evaded the consecutive attacks from the *minion*'s two arms, two legs, plus its tail, that I finally saw the pattern for, with a step. Turning towards the enemy that tried to regain its distance, I released the consecutive hit skill ingrained into my body.

I had thought for a long time that it was strange the same sword skills as the world of SAO would exist in the Underworld. I went through multiple conjectures over these two years, but had yet to reach a perfect answer. An engineer at Rath might have made use of the «The Seed» package to construct the virtual world, but as far as I knew, the sword skill system hadn't been included in The Seed. If it had, I should have been able to activate sword skills in Gun Gale Online back when I converted.

There was a possibility that the wise sage who stayed hidden in the Great Library Room, Cardinal, would know the truth, but I hesitated in asking the girl for it. Cardinal was aware that all of the Underworld's inhabitants, including herself, were existences brought to life for an experiment by a corporation in the real world, Rath, and felt agony over her own fate. I couldn't bear to thrust a question that implied this world was in any way fictional without the girl's assent. In the first place, with things progressed this far, the reason behind the existence of sword skill was certainly not important. If it served its purpose and granted me combat potential, that would suffice.

The sword in my right hand was tinged with a blue gleam and I initiated the horizontal four hits skill, «Horizontal Square».

"Uo… ryaaa!"

The slash released with a somewhat uncouth shout wasn't meant to oppose Alice, but it slashed away the *minion*'s two arms and tail, smoothly severing its torso horizontally in the end. Bracing myself to not leap off the terrace with the excess momentum, I looked on at the remains of the monster, now in pieces, as they fell and sank into the sea of clouds far below.

If those lumps didn't vanish in midair and fell before some ascetic or anyone else taking a walk around the cathedral's inner court, there would be a huge uproar… while thinking about such things;

"…Heh."

Alice briefly muttered with a tone like that of a mentor looking onto a disciple's skills.

Sweeping the black sword left and right to clear it, I put it back into the sheath at the left of my waist—I actually wanted to equip it on my back, but there weren't any sword belts of the shoulder harness type in the armory—as I looked at the knight from the side.

"…What?"

"No, I was merely thinking that you use strange skills. About how it might draw some guests if you were to perform it at a theater during the midsummer festivities.

"Well, thanks."

After making a wry smile at the grand knight, using sarcasm on every single little thing, I looked at Alice's face from the front. I voiced out the question that suddenly surfaced in my mind.

"…Have you ever seen Centoria's midsummer festival? If I had to describe it, I would have to say it was mainly a festival for the masses, with barely any of the students born as upper class nobles in the Sword Mastery Academy going for it…"

Of course, there were exceptions, like Sortiliena-senpai, who I served as a valet for, looking forward to it each year. Those nostalgic thoughts came to me before Alice snorted.

"Please don't associate me with those upper class nobles who put on airs. Of course I've… went……"

Those scornful words gradually slowed down and eventually cut off.

The knight frowned with her lips still slightly opened and cast her eyes down as though she was searching for something. Bring up her left hand that lost its gauntlet, she pressed her finger tips against her smooth brow. Alice shook her head countless times in that manner and slowly raised her face, then murmured in a tone that seemed somewhat vague.

"No… I heard of that festival… from some ascetic. Integrity knights are… forbidden from mingling with townspeople aside from during duty, so…"

"……"

That was only natural. The integrity knights believe themselves to have been existences summoned from the Celestial World by the highest minister, Administrator, but that was actually false. Administrator had taken humans of exceptional wisdom and might from the Human World to the cathedral, then built them up to be knights with their previous memories sealed away with the «Synthesis Ritual». Hence, it would be terrible if those knights visit the lesser world more than necessary and unexpectedly meet with their former family.

Alice's number was *thirty*, which meant she was the «newest» knight after Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one who just became an integrity knight this spring. She was likely synthesized within a year from now and the girl was taken from Rulid Village eight years ago, so she actually had a blank span of over seven years.

How exactly did Alice spend those days in the cathedral… I didn't know she learnt the sacred arts as a sister, or perhaps spent it «frozen» by Administrator. However, maybe she had visited Centoria's midsummer festival before she became a knight? Could it be that the memory, that should have been sealed, revived for an instant due to the earlier conversation—?

In that case, if I were to continue asking about the midsummer festival now, the «piety module» sealing Alice's memories could be removed like what happened when I fought against Eldrie, couldn't it?

Having thought of that, I started to open my mouth once again. However, I clenched my teeth tight after taking in a breath.

Cardinal had said it. That to turn Knight Alice to Alice Schuberg, Eugeo's childhood friend, taking the piety module out wouldn't be enough. That the «most important memory fragment» stolen from Alice by the highest minister was definitely necessary. Hence, if Alice's module were to be removed now, the girl should lose her consciousness in that instant and become immobile. I would rather avoid that in the present circumstances where we didn't know when our next enemy would appear.

First and foremost, Alice showed no sign of distress at all when she saw Eugeo whom she had got on well with for several years back in Rulid. In other words, that was how strong the seal on Alice's memories was. The chance of removing the module with a topic like the midsummer festival was slim and on the other hand, it might even cause her wariness towards me to increase.

Alice suspiciously gazed at my face as I went through those thoughts in silence, but soon scowled as though she had noticed something again.

"The *minions*' blood bring about illness. Clean it off properly."

"Nn? Aah…"

I noticed for the first time that several drops of the blood spurted out from the demon had showered onto my left cheek Alice pointed it out. In the moment I tried to wipe the pungent fluid away with my shirt's sleeve, a stinging reprimand came flying.

"Hey!"

It must have been years since someone got angry at me in that manner… Alice glared at me, who was dumbfounded, with a truly frustrated expression.

"Aah, that's enough, just why are men so… Do you not carry around even a single handkerchief?"

I fumbled around my trousers' pockets, but the right was empty and the left had something that wasn't a handkerchief stuffed in it. I answered softly with my head lowered.

"I-I don't…"

"…Alright, fine, use this."

Alice pulled out a handkerchief from her long skirt that was just as pure white, then held it out to me with a look that showed abhorrence coming from the depths of her heart.

The thought of lifting up the grand knight's skirt and rubbing my cheek on it, if she was going to treat me like a kid in primary school, flashed through my mind, but I stopped as it would simply end in my death.

Borrowing the handkerchief with intricate hems that didn't have a single stain on it with thanks, when I wiped my cheek with it abashedly, the *minion*'s blood was practically absorbed into it, cleaning it up completely, as though some art to clean up stains had been cast on it.

"Thank you very much."

Sensei; I held back the urge to add that while trying to return the handkerchief, but the grand knight quickly averted her face and said a single line—

"Wash it and return it before you get slashed by me."

The future looked grim indeed. How could I persuade this grandiose knight to avoid the battle after we return into the tower and to meet up with Eugeo?

An image of my partner, who was probably climbing up the stairs in the tower about now, went through my mind as I looked around, and noticed the afterglow in the sky had completely disappeared without my notice and several stars were already blinking away. We managed to drive away the *minions* somehow, but the moon had risen and an extremely slight bit of space resources had been restocked, but that was unlikely enough to make new pitons with.

I thrust Alice's handkerchief into my right pocket and scanned the narrow terrace from left to right this time round. The petrified *minions* lined up in a row from a few meters away to the wall's corner seemed like they wouldn't come alive if we didn't get any closer. It might be possible to crush them before their petrification was lifted if we dash in and slash at their vitals with our swords, but I couldn't think of any merit in testing that risk.

As a result, we could only meekly wait here for a few hours until the moon rose.

Honestly, I would warmly entertain the thought of sitting down and resting now, but Alice would likely be offended greatly throughout that whole time. I held back a sigh while thinking about how I should initiate a talk with the integrity knight who had her face turned away.

Chapter 10
Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli
5th Month of Human World Calendar 380

I hadn't felt this isolated for a long time.

Eugeo murmured in his heart as he climbed the long staircases on his own.

Eugeo had passed his days immersed in swinging that axe in the forest, his eyes, ears, and heart shut away, ever since that summer eight years ago when he could do nothing more than look on as Alice was bound onto a flying dragon's foot and taken away. Not a single person in the village, including his family, brought up this major incident of the village chief's daughter getting taken away by an integrity knight with him, practically treating that very act as a taboo in itself—or rather, it could have been as they avoided Eugeo who was a close friend of Alice.

However, much like the villagers, Eugeo also kept them, as well as his memories of the incident, at a distance. Not acknowledging his own weakness and cowardice, he tried to turn his eyes away from the past and future by sinking deep into a muddy bog by the name of resignation. —But.

That one boy, who wandered in without a single belonging to his name in the spring two years ago, tugged Eugeo out from that bottomless swamp with all his might. They repelled a group of goblins and felled the Gigas Cedar together; he bestowed confidence and a goal to Eugeo once more.

He was always by his side when they rushed out from Rulid Village, when they advanced onto the capital through Zakkaria City, and when they trained day after day at the Sword Mastery Academy—Kirito was there. Though it was awry from their initial plans, their success in infiltrating their final goal, the Axiom Church's Central Cathedral, and surpassing numerous obstacles to arrive at this high position was unmistakably thanks to his black-haired partner guiding him and cheering him on.

And yet, despite how the highest floor was a mere distance away, Kirito had vanished from Eugeo's sight. Amidst the fierce battle against Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty, created from his childhood friend, Alice Schuberg, with false, implanted memories, Kirito's full armament control art mingled with the knight's and brought forth an abnormal power and bored a huge hole through the cathedral's wall.

The pair were sucked out from the tower in the blink of an eye and the huge hole returned to the wall it originally was immediately thereafter. The marble wall showed not the slightest sign of budging even when slashed at with the Blue Rose Sword or hit with the greatest thermal elemental offensive arts he possessed.

In all likelihood, the cathedral's outer walls had a permanent self-repair art performed upon them. A sacred art so ridiculously advanced that Eugeo couldn't even imagine the first line for it to the extent of his knowledge. Hence, even if he moved the stone wall by a mere cen after all his desperate effort, it would probably be restored to how it was. Opening up a hole in the wall, even for a moment, must have been because Kirito and Knight Alice's full control arts concealed a power that exceeded what the art user who casted that self-repair art on the tower's outer walls had expected.

To put that another way, they couldn't have died from simply getting thrown out if they possessed such power. Especially Kirito, who definitely had more capability in reacting to unexpected situations even when compared to the higher ranked integrity knights. He must have resisted the fall somehow and had already started on an ascent from outside the tower. And that likely applied to Knight Alice too.

The current Alice was a guardian of the absolute Axiom Church, so he couldn't imagine her cooperating with Kirito, but at the very least, she should chase after him if he were to climb the wall. An opportunity to use the short sword granted by Cardinal should present itself again if he could reunite with them somewhere on the higher floors.

Believing thusly, Eugeo opened the door on the southern end of the eightieth floor, «Cloudtop Garden», and started on the grand staircase up on his own. All while shaking off the sense of forlornness and helplessness that seemed to have crept up his back ever since he became alone.

It wouldn't be strange to be dragged into a new assault at any time, so he ceased running and advanced with caution, but he didn't feel any human presence even after passing the eighty-first and eighty-second floors.

They had driven away «Frost Scale Whip» Eldrie, «Conflagrant Flame Bow» Deusolbert, the apprentice knights, Fizel and Linel, «Heaven Piercing Sword» Fanatio and her subordinates, «Four Oscillation Blades»; that brought the count to nine integrity knights in total, but those called «Knight Commander» and «Chief Elder» were still in the tower, and of course, the highest minister, Administrator, lay in wait as well.

He could hardly imagine the most eminent being in the Axiom Church, and thus, the world, would suddenly appear, but the Knight Commander and Chief Elder couldn't possibly let him pass through to the highest floor without resistance. As such, he strained his senses to their limits and cautiously ascended the staircase with his hand on his Blue Rose Sword, but his mind couldn't help but to get invaded by superfluous thoughts.

How are Kirito and Knight Alice doing at the moment?

Is Alice chasing Kirito as he climbs the tower's outer walls? Or maybe their battle is continues even now while dangling off the tower's walls? Or perhaps… the mysterious charm from that human known as Kirito had made even Alice, as aloof as she was, draw back her sword…?

Eugeo sensed an unfamiliar feeling well up in his chest the moment he thought that. That acted as a stimulant, the discord he felt when he swung his sword towards the fallen Integrity Knight Deusolbert several hours ago prickling yet again.

Aware that Deusolbert was the one who took away Alice from Rulid Village eight years ago, anger and hatred urged Eugeo into action as he tried to thrust an end to the knight. However, in that moment Kirito held him back, Eugeo felt a strong sense of inferiority towards his close friend.

You wouldn't have just watched on like me back then. You would have thrown care to the wind and attacked the integrity knight in an attempt to save Alice; he thought.

That strength and kindness of Kirito might reach even the heart of the integrity knight, Alice. Of course, Alice as she was now, was a so-called fake with her memories stolen by the highest minister. But… if it was that Kirito, who tried to help Deusolbert and even Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio, who brought him to the verge of death… perhaps……

"——That's not possible."

Muttering so, Eugeo forced his stream of thoughts to a stop.

There was no purpose in thinking any further. Upon regaining the «memory fragment» safe kept on the highest floor of the cathedral and returning it to Integrity Knight Alice's soul, the current Alice would vanish along with all of her memories. And the real Alice, the person most important to Eugeo, would return.

I will embrace the awakened girl tightly and definitely say it this time. That I will protect you… I will protect you forever. That moment will arrive tomorrow, or this night if circumstances allow it.

Hence, there was no need for idle thoughts now, it was the time to do nothing but to advance forth.

Just as the seven o'clock bell rang out in the evening from somewhere in the cathedral, the staircase came to a stop.

That made the count he kept, of the floors passing by, reach a round ten. In other words, this was the ninetieth floor. He had set foot onto the crucial section of the Axiom Church at long last.

No stairs further up could be seen anywhere in the broad hall. There was only a single grand door at the northern wall. There was no mistake that a vast area utilizing the entire floor, like the fiftieth and eightieth floors, lay ahead.

And with that, an enemy stronger than any before must be lying in wait.

—Can I win? All by myself?

Standing still at the end of the hall, Eugeo asked himself. Just how could he fight against someone stronger than Fanatio, who drove Kirito half the way to his death, and Alice, who they were no match for, even as a pair.

However, now that he thought about it, Kirito had took on all of the enemies' attacks by himself in the battles thus far. Eugeo had hidden behind his partner's back and merely activated his full control art. Kirito had said that it was the natural strategy considering the natures of their skills, but with him away, Eugeo had no choice but to fight from the start to the end.

Gently caressing the Blue Rose Sword at the left of his waist, he ascertained the sensations of its grip and guard. He could probably use the full control art just one more time, but he couldn't capture the enemy with the ice tendrils by activating it blindly. He had to first drive the enemy into a corner with pure swordsmanship and create an opening.

"…It's time."

With that whisper to his beloved sword, Eugeo brought up his right hand and strongly pushed open the white door.

What immediately closed in were bright lighting, a dense, white smoke, and a dull, unceasing sound.

—Offensive sacred arts!?

Thinking so instinctively, Eugeo tried to jump aside, but noticed the white mist streaming out was not smoke, but steam. His hands and sleeves merely got wet upon contact, there was no pain. He assessed the state of the interior across the swirling heat.

As expected, it was a vast space that expended the entire area of a single cathedral floor. The ceiling countless lamps were fitted onto was high as well, so it likely had a name resembling the «Cloister of Spiritual Light» or «Sky Garden»*, but he didn't have the means to find it out right now. The floor surface couldn't be seen through the obstructing steam, but there seemed to be no human presence.

Eugeo took only a few steps into the space and tried to find the source of the steam. When he did, he noticed with his ears, rather than his eyes, the splish-splashing sound of water. There was no mistake that the roaring was of a large quantity of water falling onto water, coming from somewhere far.

That was when cold air flowed in from the still-opened door and swept aside the surrounding steam.

A marble path with a breadth of roughly five mel extended deeper into the space from Eugeo's position. The sides of the path dipped down with steps and filled there, to the brim, was clear water—no, hot water. It seemed to have a depth of over one mel, and Eugeo couldn't even begin to imagine how many lil of hot water would it total up to if that filled the entire room.

"…Just, what is this room…"

Eugeo’s hoarse voice leaked out upon the far too unexpected scene.

The temperature of the water was too hot as a pond for rearing fish or other animals and the humidity wasn’t pleasant enough for it be a garden for admiration. It would even be more comfortable to strip down and jump into the hot—

“Ah…… do-don’t tell me…”

After murmuring once again, he knelt down by the side of the pathway and thrust his right hand into the hot water. It was neither hot nor warm, it was at a temperature that Kirito would comment as “a nice water temperature” if he was here.

In other words, this was a gigantic bath.

“……”

Without any further words coming from him, Eugeo deeply sighed while kneeling.

His home until two years ago used a rather large tub as a bathtub and by the time Eugeo got into it as the last person, only half of the hot water would have been left. Hence, he got struck dumbfounded the first time he saw the large bath in the academy’s dormitories and wondered how could such a large quantity of hot water be boiled.

However, this bath was on an entirely different level. There would still be space even if all of the apprentices in the Sword Mastery Academy were to get into together. No, of course, the male students couldn’t possibly enter a bath together with the female students, though.

After taking another sigh, Eugeo took the opportunity to wash his two hands in the hot water and stood up, holding back the urge to wash his face too. He started on the marble path likely heading deeper into the space, towards the staircase to the upper floors. No matter how things were, getting assaulted in a bath would simply be too—

Or so he thought before he noticed belatedly.

The path expanded into a circle in the middle of the large space, the large bath. When he approached, Eugeo finally sensed someone’s silhouette beyond the steam hanging over the water surface in front, on the right.

"—!?"

Instinctively jumping back, he placed his hand onto his sword's grip.

He couldn't see too well with the steam obstructing, but the other party had a pretty large build. Short hair and unfeminine. Submerged up to his shoulders in the hot water, he was stretching out all four limbs.

The man appeared to be simply bathing rather than lying in wait, but he couldn't let down his guard. Regardless of the circumstances, that was unmistakably an enemy, so perhaps he should be attempt a preemptive attack while the opponent was still in the water.

It happened when Eugeo quietly slid his beloved sword out from its sheath.

"Sorry, but could ya wait for a bit? I mean, I just got to the capital a moment ago, so my whole body's stiff from all the flying dragon riding."

The voice was low and worn-out, but had substance. The speech that was more crude than anyone he encountered in the cathedral unwittingly left him silent. The lack of grandstanding reminded him of the peasants of his home town rather than of a knight.

While Eugeo stayed undecided over his reaction, splashing noises rang out and the steam concealing the gigantic bathtub parted to the left and right.

The owner of the voice had drops of water pouring off his entire body like a waterfall while he got up. With his back to Eugeo, he placed his two hands on his waist and rotated his neck, letting out a sluggish groan. He appeared full of openings, but Eugeo didn't take a single step with his hand still on his sword.

What a tremendous body. The part below his knees was still under the hot water, but still, it was clear the man measured close to two mel. His iron-gray hair, tinged blue, was trimmed short and exposed his shockingly thick neck. Furthermore, the shoulders it connected to were abnormally broad yet again. His forearm, on the level of a log, must be able to wave swords around with ease, regardless of how heavy they might be.

What drew his eyes the most was his back, covered in layers of muscles. Gorgolosso Baltoh, whom Eugeo served as a valet, could boast of a tempered body as well, but the man in the bath reached new heights of bulkiness. Despite the unlikeness of him being young, there was no slackening around his hips whatsoever.

As his sight was stolen by the man's standing posture, like the very image of an ancient god of war, Eugeo failed to immediately notice the countless old wounds running across his entire body. Observing properly, he saw that they were all wounds from arrows and blades. Scars, even from severe wounds, shouldn't remain if treated quickly with high ranking sacred arts, so that meant he must have always been fighting on battlefields which rendered even that act impossible, for long stretches of time.

The man in the bath was, in all likelihood, the one called the Knight Commander.

In other words, the mightiest expert among all of the integrity knights. The greatest hurdle thwarting Eugeo's path to the top of the Cathedral—

In that case, it would be best to slash and defeat the man while he held no weapon and armor. Kirito would definitely have done that. Even while his mind thought so, Eugeo stayed still.

He couldn't judge whether the man's back was full of openings or flawlessly brimming with preparation. He could even imagine the man was luring him into an attack.

Paying no heed to Eugeo's hesitation, the man finished loosening his body, then began walking north as he parted the hot water. A basket had been placed a little way ahead on the path that seemed to have his clothes in it.

Having taken the steps up and straddled over the edge, the man took undershorts out from the basket and passed them through his legs. Next, he spread open clothes of thin make and wore them. It seemed to be clothes made in the north empire and while wrapping a wide cloth that came with the previous, the man finally turned his face to Eugeo.

"Yo, sorry for the wait."

He had a firm look that matched the deep, worn-out voice well.

The wrinkle engraved near his mouth likely showed the man was over forty years old when he became an integrity knight, but his cheeks split by his high nose bridge were not slackened in any way. However, what left a deeper impression was the light in his eyes released from beneath his prominent eyebrows.

Despite the lack of what could be constituted as blood-thirst in those pale, light blue eyes, he felt an intense pressure just from facing him from over fifteen mel away. His gaze likely contained only pure interest in the opponent he would now cross swords against, and the rapture of battle itself? The only ones who could look upon an enemy with such eyes have had to possess an absolute confidence in their own swordsmanship. In other words, this man resembled Kirito somehow.

Having finished tying the sash in front of his body, the man turned his right hand to the clothes basket. With that, a longsword gently came out from the bottom of the basket, settling into his burly hand. Carrying it on his shoulder, he began walking on the marble with his wet, bare feet.

Standing still after closing until a mere eight mel or so away from Eugeo, the man rubbed his sturdy chin that had a short beard growing from it and spoke.

“There. Could ya tell me something before we fight?”

“…What is it?”

“Well, that’d be… did the deputy knight commander… did Fanatio die?”

That curt tone, as if asking about the menu for dinner, made Eugeo feel like retorting with a “Aren’t you talking about your deputy?” However, he immediately noticed an awkwardly constructed guise on the man’s expression as he averted his gaze to the side. Despite being truly anxious about it, he seemed averse to revealing that. That, too, brought to mind the partner who wasn’t present.

“…She’s alive. She’s receiving treatment right now… I believe.”

Having heard Eugeo’s reply, the man brazenly let out a sharp breath and nodded.

“I see. I won’t be taking your life then.”

“Wha……”

Once again, he was at a loss of words. It was a conceit so immense that it had no room for suspicion over it being a bluff. Self-confidence was a great weapon in its own right, or so Kirito had said, but even he wouldn't show this much composure in front of a strong enemy. The source of the rock-hard pride belonging to the giant of a man before his eyes was probably impossible for both Kirito and Eugeo to obtain—the experiences of winning through countless fierce battles, enough for every single one of those wounds all over his body.

However, even the count is significantly lower than his, Eugeo had also driven away integrity knights, just like this man, on more than one occasion on the way up here. Showing weakness before they cross swords would be inexcusable to the defeated integrity knights, to Gorgolosso and the academy's instructors who trained Eugeo, and of course, to his black-haired partner.

Mustering all the fighting spirit he had, Eugeo stared at the man head-on. He spoke with strength to his stomach, for his voice to not quiver.

"I don't like it."

"Oh?"

With his hand still in the bosom of his oriental clothes, the man let out an amused voice.

"What don't you, boy?"

"Fanatio-san isn't the only one of your subordinates, is she? There are Eldrie-san and the «Four Oscillation Blades»… and do you not care whether Alice is dead or alive either?"

"Aah… that's what you were getting at"

The man looked up and scraped the side of his head with the longsword's grip held in his left hand.

"I guess it's like this… Eldrie's lil' Alice's disciple and the Four Oscillation Blades, Dakira, Jeis, Hobren, and Giro, are Fanatio's disciples. So, that makes Fanatio mine, you see? I'm not one for holding grudges, but at the very least, I'll take revenge if my disciple gets killed; that's all to it."

He broadly grinned, then added on as if it just occurred to him.

"…Well, lil' Alice might think of me as a mentor, though… honestly now, I don't know who'd be stronger now in a real fight. It wasn't that hard six years ago when the lil' miss just became a knight apprentice, though."

"Six years ago… a knight apprentice…?"

Forgetting about his retort towards the man for the moment, Eugeo murmured.

Six years ago would mean two years after she was taken away from Rulid. Kirito had taught him that the integrity knights' names included a «number» in Sacred Tongue as they climbed the stairs and it seemed Alice was thirty, Eldrie was thirty-one, and Deusolbert was seven. It shouldn't have been that long ago when Alice became a knight, judging from the newness of her number, but—

"…But Alice is *thirty*… the thirtieth integrity knight, right?"

The man lightly tilted his head at Eugeo's question, but immediately let out an "aah".

"Generally, we aren't in the habit of giving numbers to apprentices. The lil' miss became *thirty* last year when she was formally commissioned as a knight. She was more than qualified as one with her capabilities even six years ago, but she was too young and all…"

"But… Fizel and Linel possessed numbers despite being apprentices."

The instant he heard those names, the man's mouth distorted as though he just bit down on a bitterbug.

"…It just turned out that way with those pipsqueaks becoming knights. They're exceptions, getting numbers while still apprentices. —Did you fight those two? Living through that's surprising in a whole different way from defeating Fanatio."

"We did get paralyzed by «Ruberyl's poison steel» and almost got beheaded, though."

Eugeo considered further while replying.

The man knew Alice when she was a knight apprentice. Hence, Alice had her memories sealed through the «Synthesis Ritual» a whole six years ago… when she was thirteen, it seems. Thereafter, Alice believed herself to be an existence summoned from the Celestial World in order to become an integrity knight and continued living in the cathedral…?

Gazing at Eugeo who sank into silence, the giant man shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I don't plan on losing to ya, so I doubt the lil' miss who's as strong as me got cut by you. From what I heard from that Chief Elder bastard, you had a partner, huh? If that guy isn't that, he's probably going at it with the lil' miss somewhere, eh?"

"…That's essentially it."

After finding himself nodding, Eugeo restored the tight grip on his sword. He couldn't help but to have his animosity chipped away by the man's speech, but this was no situation to lose his focus. Concentrating his two eyes further, he cried out a taunt.

"By the way, who will be the next to exact vengeance on me after I cut you?"

"Hehe, don't worry. There's no master of mine around."

He grinned and gently drew the longsword from his shoulder with his right hand. He carelessly stuck the scabbard left over into his sash with his left hand.

The slightly blackened, bulky blade was meticulously polished, but the infinite amount of old blemishes faintly remaining over its entire length glittered in the illumination shining in from the ceiling. The guard and grip appeared to be made from the same quality of metal as the blade, but unlike the sacred tools wield by the integrity knights he had fought thus far, not even a single splendid decoration adorned them.

That said, it was clear that was no weapon to look down upon, even from afar. It must have taken a considerable amount of blood over an endless period of time, with a sort of presence coiling about the dark-gray blade.

Eugeo, too, drew his beloved sword out from the sheath at the left of his waist while taking in a sharp, thin breath. It wasn't in its full control state, but its pale-blue blade let out a faint chill, perhaps responding to its owner's tension, forming flickering crystals of ice in the surrounding steam.

In a gallant motion that suited that fine body, the man pulled back his right leg while holding the sword in his right hand near vertical and visibly lowered his waist. It resembled the stance for the Norkia-style's secret move, «Lightning Flash Slash», but differed slightly. Setting the sword that straight would result in a need for excessive movement in order to activate that skill.

Eugeo took the stance for the Aincrad-style's secret move, «Sonic Leap», with that consideration.

As far as Eugeo knew, the mysterious Aincrad style, with its own practitioner, his partner, Kirito, had skill names in Sacred Tongue for all of its secret moves. The Sacred Tongue was a holy language passed down onto the Axiom Church's originator by the three goddesses during the creation of the world, with no dictionary for it in the Sword Mastery Academy's library—or even the castles the four emperors resided within, according to what he had heard from the instructors.

Knowledge on the meaning behind its vocabulary was restricted to those used in sacred art rituals. Hence, even Eugeo, who studied diligently in the academy, knew only the meaning for words like «*element*» or «*generate*» from the limited vocabulary.

However, despite how he lost all of his previous memories before appearing in Rulid Forest two years ago, Kirito seemed to have known of bits of Sacred Tongue that Eugeo didn't. The vocabulary used in the secret moves' names were no exception; he said Sonic Leap had the meaning of «jumping at the speed of sound». He didn't know exactly how fast sound travelled, but it was a mighty skill that lived up to its name, shooting forth or back a long distance of ten mel with ridiculous vigor. A preemptive attack was effectively secured if it was activated when the enemy took the first step to shorten the gap.

A fresh vertical wrinkle engraved itself upon the man's brows when he saw Eugeo, tension released from his body and his sword placed on his right shoulder.

"Now that's one uncommon stance, boy. …You don't happen to practice the Continual Sword, do you?"

"……!"

The moment he heard that subdued question, Eugeo drew a sharp breath.

To be specific, the Sonic Leap Eugeo was going to execute was a single-hit secret move. However, it was the same as the consecutive hit skills at the core of the Aincrad style, in terms of how they did not exist in the styles passed down in the Human World. As expected, this man was no average person, to see through that from a single stance.

However, even if he had guessed that Eugeo used consecutive hit skills, he shouldn't be able to perceive the boundaries of the Aincrad style. As long as the man hadn't fought Kirito before he had lost his memory.

"…How does it matter even if I use the consecutive hit skills?"

Upon replying in a low voice, the man snorted.

"Nah, there were just some among those darkness knights in the Dark Territory who use the Continual Sword too, and I fought them loads of times. Those aren't really good memories… after all, those of us on this side can't use any of those fancy fluid skills at all, ya know?"

"…Are you asking me to fight with a traditional style?"

"No, no, whether it's the Continual Sword or whatever else, I don't care what it is, go ahead. I'm not saying this is to compensate for that or anything, but I'll be starting with my trump card too."

After twisting one side of his lips into a grin, the man thrust up the longsword, wielded straight in his right hand, even higher.

Eugeo's breath was taken away once more immediately after. The weathered grey blade vibrated like a heat haze. He thought it was due to the steam flowing through the large bath, but no matter how hard he squinted, he could only perceive it as the longsword itself losing its solidity.

—Could it be that that sword is already in its full control state?

He frantically pondered while in the stance for the secret move.

He might had only been taught the «armament full control art» by the mysterious sage, Cardinal, recently, but he had already gained a relatively good understanding over this secret art through the multiple cases of actual combat.

It resemble secret moves in how it granted the sword a stronger strength, but in the end, the full control art was a sacred art, so that made an incantation necessary. As such, that permitted momentarily maintaining a standby state in between chanting the main body of the art and activating it with the ending line, "*enhance armament*", like normal sacred arts.

The amount of time the activation standby state for sacred arts can be maintained was influenced by the user's character and experience. Eugeo could maintain it for several minutes if he closed his mouth and focused his mind, but Kirito had shown he could hold the art while conversing with that astounding concentration he had at times like this.

He still had no idea what sort of skill the full control art of the giant man before him was, but it was evident he was quite an expert, simply judging from how he could hold a long conversation during the activation standby state. In comparison, Eugeo had no time to start chanting the art now and one way or another, the ice roses art could not exhibit its true abilities in this space filled with hot water.

In that case, he had only one path. He could only hit the man with Sonic Leap in the gap created by him executing a secret move—or activating his full control art, and conclude the battle. The opponent should be expecting Eugeo's attack to be a consecutive hit skill, so it was unlikely he could react to a leaping attack at extremely high speed.

Determined, Eugeo put all of his focus into his two eyes and observed the entirely of the man.

The distance was approximately eight mel.

The Norkia style, as well as the school above it, the High Norkia style, had no skill that could reach from this range. So, if the man intended to swing his sword from the position he stood at without moving, the «trump card» he mentioned must be a armament full control art along the lines of extending his slash's reach. He would have to evade that somehow and end this with a single counterattack.

As Eugeo envisioned, the man continued standing in that spot and slowly held the sword, kept vertical with his right arm, aloft. His mouth lost its smile and released a roar that shook the entire large bath.

"I am the commander of the integrity knights—Bercouli Synthesis One!!"

Where have I heard of that name—that thought flashed through his mind for an instant, but Eugeo discarded his idle thoughts and focused entirely on discerning the enemy's skill.

A heavy thud roared out, the man who named himself as the knight commander stamped his left foot onto the marble pavement. The surrounding steam scattered away at once.

Those burly waist, chest, shoulders, and arms turned in a dreadful and rapid, yet composed movement. The sword raised straight first fell to the right, then swung horizontally. Eugeo felt it to be the ultimate form of the sword skills passed down among the traditional styles. A motion that could only be realized through training over an extensive stretch of time, both formless and perfected.

However, all traditional sword skills possessed a common weakness. As a consequence of the «form» being far too grand, the attack's trajectory becomes predictable. By the time the knight commander's sword began to slice apart the white vapor horizontally, Eugeo had already jumped forth, towards the left. That should be enough to narrowly evade any offense the sword had launched in its full control state, whatever it could have been.

The air quivered near his right ear. But he felt neither pain nor impact.

—I dodged it!

Assured of that, Eugeo activated the secret move, Sonic Leap, on his next step.

"O… oooh!"

His sword wore a green radiance tinged with yellow at his shout. His entire self accelerated, pushed by an unseen force, and Eugeo became a gust of wind, charging towards the knight commander who had swung his sword.

Behind him, the air pressure from the sword that he previously dodged hit the door to the large bath and let out a loud—

No.

Nothing rang out. He couldn't sense the slightest vibration.

Was the slash that the knight commander should have launched really that fast? Or perhaps it vanished before reaching the door behind?

Impossible. If that was true, the armament full control art of the knight commander, the man who should be stronger than Deusolbert and Fanatio, would be inferior to even Eldrie's full control art, despite how he had only became a knight a mere one month ago. Eldrie's «Frost Scale Whip» attack was as quick as lightning, reaching as far as several ten mel.

That couldn’t be possible. In that case, was the knight commander’s skill not a far-range type of attack? But in actual fact, Eugeo hadn’t received a single bit of damage.

If that was the case, the man had only executed a practice swing? A display of form, no different from what the students performed during the Sword Mastery Academy’s examinations.

—Is he making a fool out of me?

—Or perhaps he thought he could scare off some kid who’s still attending school with just a single practice swing?

The core of his head burned up the instant he felt that.

He was slow to notice, as a result.

There was something directly in front of the man who just swung his sword, in Eugeo’s path as he rushed forward while leaving behind a line of light from the secret move. A transparent fluctuation horizontally cut through the air. Much like the heat haze that enveloped the man’s sword right before he began that slash.

—That spot’s… where his practice swing cut through earlier…

A profound chill ran down his back. Although he instinctively attempted to interrupt his charge, a secret move couldn’t be stopped that easily once activated. He drew back his sword and scrapped his right foot against the floor, but his speed merely fell slightly and—

Eugeo’s body immediately came into contact with the heat haze that remained in midair.

A scorching hot impact surged through his left breast to his right armpit. Eugeo was blown away like an old rag flapping in a squall, swung around several times as he fluttered in the air. A large quantity of blood drew a spiral as they flowed out from the deep injury carved in his chest.

He fell back-first into the bath on the left of the pathway. A water sprout rose high and the surroundings were dyed in crimson the moment that settled down.

“Gu… haa…!”

He spewed out the hot water that made their way into his throat and that spray, too, was tinged red. It appeared part of his injuries had reached his lungs. If he hadn't killed some of that momentum, despite the slight amount it had been, immediately before crashing into that heat haze, it wouldn't be strange even for his body to be slashed into two now.

"*System… call. Generate… luminous element…*"

His body floating in the bath, he chanted a healing art in disconnected streams. Fortunately, he was surrounded by a large quantity of warm water. They should possess an amount of sacred power significantly more than what cold water had. That said, Eugeo couldn't completely treat a wound that severe in a such short period of time with his capabilities, though.

The knight commander standing on the pathway calmly looked down upon Eugeo as he somehow succeeded in stopping the flow of blood and roused his body in his lightheadedness. He had already slipped his sword into the scabbard on the left of his waist and thrust his right arm into the breast of his clothes.

"That was pretty dangerous, I mean, I didn't think you were going to rush in at a speed like that. Sorry 'bout that, almost killed you there."

Those words lacked urgency even now, but Eugeo couldn't find the strength to rebut any longer and forced out a hoarse voice from his hurting lungs.

"Wh… what was that… skill…"

"I did say I'd be using my trump card. I didn't just slash the air with some practice swing, yeah? In a sense… I slashed the future of a little later."

It took a little while for him to realize any tangible meaning from the knight commander's words. The wound that throbbed, as though ice was pushed purely against the spot despite the surrounding hot water, robbed him of his thoughts.

—The future… was slashed?

That certainly was a valid description for that phenomenon.

There was no mistake that Eugeo activated Sonic Leap after the knight commander had swung his sword. However, as if the sword had assaulted him from the past, Eugeo suffered from a deep gash the moment he touched the trajectory of that slash.

No— To put it more accurately, it should said that the force behind that sword slash remained in midair. Eugeo did see something like a heat haze wavering in the air before he was blown away.

The «right place» and the «right time» were necessary for a sword slash to hit. The sword would miss the enemy if either the place or time were off.

In all likelihood, the knight commander's full control art extended the latter of those conditions, time. Power remained within the trajectory even after the sword had been swung. To say it in another way—it slashed the enemy in that position of the future.

It was the most plain, appearance-wise, among the armament full control arts the knights he had faced thus far commanded, but still, this was a horrifying ability. Anywhere that sword passed through would be converted into a lethal domain. The «extent» of which would far exceed the duration of continuous slashes that consecutive hit skills boasted of. Close combat of sword versus sword would be practically impossible.

—Then I'll have to bring this into a far range battle?

Even if the knight commander's full control art could extend time, it couldn't lengthen the slashes' range. In comparison, the range of the «ice tendrils» brought forth by Eugeo's full control art exceeded thirty mel.

The question was whether the Blue Rose Sword could exhibit its original potential in this place with much hot water. At the very least, he would have to be prepared for a little delay on its effect after activation. In other words, he would need to draw the enemy in to a range such that it wouldn't be possible to escape beyond the range of the ice tendrils art even if its nature was seen through.

It would be tough, but there was no choice.

Steeling himself for the sink-or-swim bout, Eugeo touched his breast with his left hand. A shocking, sharp pain ran through, but it seemed the wound wouldn't open even if he moved for a bit. Of course, it was far from fully healed and his Life likely reduced by over thirty percent, but he could still stand and even swing his sword.

"*System call.*"

Merging his voice into the roaring noises of water coming from the spouts installed in the four corners of the bath, Eugeo began chanting the art. An expert like the knight commander couldn't possibly miss that, but rather than obstructing the chant, he even dared to continue chatting leisurely on the pathway with his arms folded, as though granting Eugeo the time.

"The first time I saw the darkness knights' Continual Sword was practically right after I got my duties as an integrity knight, ya know? I got hit so hard at first I couldn't even make a sound. I ran back in panic, then thought about why I lost with this crappy brain of mine for quite some time."

The scar on his chin the knight commander rubbed with his fingertips was from that time, perhaps.

"Well, it's not too hard when you think about it. Main point is, compared to the swordsmanship my body had been immersed in, going one-mindedly after the might of a single strike, the Continual Sword goes for the obvious path of blocking the enemy's hits and succeeding in one's own, that was all to it. I don't have to point out which is more practical. No matter how powerful a strike it is, it's just like a little breeze blew back if it doesn't hit, yeah…"

The ends of his lips twisted and he took a short, audible breath.

"—But even if I figured out that much, I'm not so good that I could just start learning the Continual Sword right away, you see. Man, if the highest minister was summoning an integrity knight, she should have picked some guy with a little more flexibility."

Eugeo frowned at those words as he continued chanting.

As expected, the man who named himself the knight commander had the memories before he became an integrity knight erased as well. However, even if he himself were to lose those memories, would it be possible for every single person in the world, without exception, to forget about someone with such proficiency with the greatsword? Ever since the man stated his name so grandly earlier, Eugeo himself had felt an itch in a corner of his mind, as though it reminded him of someone.

Bercouli Synthesis One. That should have been what the man called himself.

He had definitely heard of that name somewhere. A champion of the Four Empire Unity Tournament, or perhaps some general of the imperial knight orders.

Behaving as though Eugeo's fixed gaze on his face and the art he composed in a whisper didn't bother him in the slightest, the knight commander continued talking, detached from the situation.

"And so, I racked my poor brain and thought about how I could hit the enemy with my sword. And this guy's the answer."

He made a metallic sound with the crude sword that was entirely steel blue, still in its scabbard.

"This sword was originally part of a sacred tool called a «clock» that was mounted on the Central Cathedral's wall, see. The «Time-telling Bell» in the same place now tells the time through sound, but that clock-thing had a huge needle pointing at numbers arranged in a round long ago, ya know. I mean, it was something that existed since the world was created… the highest minister called it the «*System Clock*»… or something strange like that, I think."

It might have been Sacred Tongue, but those words rang no bell to Eugeo. The same went for that «clock» that seemed to have been in Common Tongue. Knight Commander Bercouli's eyes narrowed as though he was peeking into the past long ago and moved his mouth once again.

"Quoting the minister, 'The clock does not merely display the time, it creates it.'… she said. I had practically no idea what that meant, though. Anyway, this guy's from forging that clock's needle into a sword. In contrast with lil' Alice's «Fragrant Olive Sword» cutting through space horizontally, this guy pierces through time vertically. Its name is «Time Piercing Sword»… the sword that pierces through time."

He found it difficult to form a tangible image of the tool called the clock, but Eugeo somehow understood what the knight commander tried to convey. The force brought forth the instant the sword was swung apparently did possess the ability to bypass time and maintain itself, in actual fact. If that was possible, there was absolutely no need to link multiple slashes together like in the Aincrad style. When asking for the reason why consecutive hit skills use consecutive hits, that would be no other than to stretch out the duration of the slashes. If Bercouli's Time Piercing Sword combined the offensive ability of single-hit skills and the accuracy of consecutive hit skills, that sword style would be peerless. As long as it was within range, that is.

As aptly put by Bercouli himself, there was only one method to counter it. He could only fight, utilizing the extent of space, rather than time.

And the same moment Eugeo thought so, the knight commander grinned.

"So you'll have to attack from a distance, that's what you thought, right? The same went for those who saw my skill, every single one of them."

He was startled by his thoughts being read, but he couldn't very well cease his chanting now. He might have predicted that Eugeo would commence a far-range attack, but he should have had no means to ascertain the skill's nature. Whether he understood what Eugeo thought in his mind or not, the knight commander lightly shrugged his shoulders.

"Including Fanatio and Alice, those integrity knights summoned after myself tended to choose full control arts with long range because they saw my skill… there were definitely some who did it because of that. But I'll say this first; I've never lost a single match against those guys. Anyone who defeats me would be as good as the new knight commander from then now, after all. Well, lil' Alice might do me in sooner or later, though. Anyway, I'm looking forward to it too. I wonder just what is that skill of yours that drove off those guys one after another."

"…Relaxed, aren't you."

Having finished chanting the art several seconds ago, Eugeo muttered so without thinking. However, perhaps because of his tension, the full control art remained on standby within Eugeo without getting annulled.

It seemed Bercouli really did give that long-winded speech in order to grant Eugeo the time to chant his full control art. He likely had the confidence to crush it on his first encounter, whatever skill it was.

And although he hated to admit it, even if the ice roses art were to capture Bercouli, he had absolutely no confidence he could shave his Life away like this. In the first place, it was an art specialized in stopping the opponent's movement. No, even that would not succeed for sure with that man as the target. He could probably rob him of his freedom for several seconds at most. The way he used that time would decide the flow of the battle.

With drops of water trickling down his whole body, Eugeo got up from the bath. Climbing the mere three marble steps at the side was enough to make the chest wound throb. Suffering another attack of the same level would likely leave him without even the strength to heal.

"Heh-heh, you coming, boy? Let me say this first, I won't be holding back anymore."

Firmly gripping the metal handle of the Time Piercing Sword worn in his clothes' sash, the knight commander smiled broadly.

Atop the pathway, twenty mel apart, Eugeo also held his Blue Rose Sword forward. The blade in its standby state was already mildly clad in ice, forming ice crystals in the drifting steam around it.

Kirito would likely retort with some comment in such a situation, but his mouth was parched and seemed hardly capable of moving fluidly. Taking in a deep breadth, Eugeo cautiously muttered the concluding phrase of the armament full control art.

"*Enhance… armament.*"

Byuu! A cold wave swirled around his feet and swept out in all directions. Eugeo thrust his beloved sword he held with a reverse grip into the stone floor with all he had.

The moisture that made the marble's smooth surface wet froze over like a mirror in an instant. Making noises like cracking wood, the icy wave plunged forward towards Bercouli at the front.

Despite the pathway having a breath of approximately five mel, the freezing wave brought forth by the Blue Rose Sword stretched close to ten mel. Layers of ice extended out over the pools filled with hot water at the sides as well, but as expected, their advance was sluggish due to the heat. However, this was no longer any time for excuses.

Shifting all of his mental focus on his right hand, Eugeo gripped the sword tighter than ever. With a solid roar, countless rose thorns, rather than tendrils, reached out from the frosty floor.

Those changed to thick icicles in the blink of an eye and their sharp ends gleamed all over the pathway while rushing towards Bercouli, gliding across the ground. However, the knight commander's mouth merely stiffened up slightly, moving no more after lowering his waist in that same position. It appeared he hadn't the slightest intention of escaping into the baths at the sides.

Eugeo steeled his resolve upon seeing that standing figure, like a guarded fortress. He wasn't an opponent that one could defeat without putting one's life on the line.

Pulling the Blue Rose Sword from the ground, he began chasing after the ranks of ice spears. His aim was the instant of vulnerability that the tens of spears might create as Bercouli intercept them.

He likely spotted the dashing Eugeo as well, but the knight commander didn't show the slightest speck of distress. He opened his legs wide apart and sent strength into the sword held at the left of his waist.

"Nuuhn!!"

Accompanying the deep yell was a single, brutal slice. The ranks of spears had yet to reach and the blade slashed horizontally through the empty air, but the Time Piercing Sword severs the future.

Half a second later, the numerous icicles all shattered simultaneously with loud, shrill screams of "gashaan". Not a single one made its way through the slash Bercouli **left behind** a moment ago. The knight commander returned his sword into an upper stance with a hateful nonchalance and prepared for Eugeo's follow-up.

However, Eugeo had finally gotten within reach of the enemy and brandished the weapon in his right hand up high. The many floating, miniscule shards of ice reflected the light from the ceiling, but the same went for his opponent.

"Seaaa!!"

"Ouhh!!"

The two screams rang out together.

The light-blue trajectory Eugeo's sword drew confronted the dark-gray one drawn by Bercouli's sword.

In the next moment.

The **sword** Eugeo held shattered with a fleeting shriek.

Bercouli's two eyes widened slightly. He must have been shocked at the lack of resistance. Eugeo's right hand, too, felt nearly none of the impact when the sword smashed into pieces.

That was only natural. Eugeo had thrown away the Blue Rose Sword he held towards the right immediately before he began rushing in, breaking of an icicle to serve as a replacement sword.

Bercouli's downwards slash had been one for repelling Eugeo's sword. He would have been overpowered and pushed backwards if the sword hadn't been made from ice. However, the icicle held in his right hand shattered with no resistance at all and Eugeo kept the momentum from his charge and slipped past the enemy's sword, plunging towards his chest.

"Ooohh!"

Rotating his body with that second yell, he rammed hard into the knight commander's abdomen with his left shoulder. It was a secret move named Meteor Break, from the Aincrad style's «martial arts». The skill's meaning was a «crushing meteor». It didn't fully activate due to the lack of a sword, but with center of gravity unsettled by the unexpected strike and his massive frame fluttered into the air.

This would have normally continued with a horizontal slash towards the right, but Eugeo spread out his two arms and joined them around the knight commander's waist instead.

"Nuhh…"

Even the huge man couldn't help but to have his stance broken by the twofold plan that threw his upper torso greatly off balance. This was the first and final chance.

"Uoooohh!!"

Erasing the pain from his wound with that roar, Eugeo wrung every bit of strength from his entire body and threw himself into the bath on the right with the knight commander. Bercouli tried to brace himself with his left foot, but his bare foot slid atop the frosted floor. Following the floating sensation his body felt, the impact from landing on water shook through to the injury on his chest.

However, that was a trifling affair compared to the blinding chill that enveloped his whole body.

"What…!?"

While Eugeo maintained his hold, a third cry of surprise escaped from Bercouli. The boiling hot water in the bath just several minutes ago had turned into cold water on the verge of freezing without his notice. His amazement was only natural.

While holding down the giant, who tried to stand, with his left hand, Eugeo searched the bottom of the bath with his right. I should have thrown it around—

Aided by half by his accurate calculations and half by good fortune, his fingertips touched the grip of his familiar, beloved sword.

Immediate after, Bercouli tried to stand, shaking Eugeo off with all his might.

And a sheer moment before that, Eugeo stabbed the Blue Rose Sword into the bottom of the bath and shouted.

"Fre… eeeeeeze!!"

This was what would decide the battle.

All that the Blue Rose Sword cooled down was a mere portion of the hot water filling the gigantic bath. There were still much hot water around them. It would likely take tens of minutes for ten sacred arts users to freeze it all, even if they generate cryogenic elements continuously. But he had no choice.

The armament full control art was an art that awakened a mighty power that was originally impossible by releasing the sword's memories.

The mysterious sage, Cardinal, was the one who said so. In order to compose the full control art for the Blue Rose Sword and the black sword, she had Eugeo and Kirito pursue the memories of their respective swords.

The sacred tool Eugeo possessed, the Blue Rose Sword, was originally a mass of ice enshrined at the top of the tallest mountain in the northern mountain range. It was cold there even during the peak of summer and the ice had never thawed throughout the year, but at the same time, not a single living being approached. The eternal mass of ice spent tens of years in isolation.

However, in a certain spring, the wind blowing through the mountain range dropped off a little seed right next to the eternal mass of ice. The ice melted itself day after day, trickling the meager water it created onto the seed. The seed eventually budded and a flower bud swelled out, enduring the intense cold, with that modest, yet beautiful flower blooming with the onset of summer. It was bluer than the skies of the north, a single rose.

Delighted that it finally had a friend, the eternal mass of ice spent each and every day conversing with the rose. But on a day after even autumn passed by, the blue rose spoke thusly. I cannot endure the cold of winter. So, it will soon be our time to part, it said.

The ice lamented. Its tears ran at the sorrow of losing its first friend and its body diminished. Looking upon the ice in that state, the blue rose spoke again. Wouldn't you shut me away within you before I wither away unseemly? Even if I were to lose my life then, my form will forever remain.

The eternal mass of ice granted the blue rose's wish. Spending its all to move into the puddle of water its tears made, it nestled close to the blue rose, then prayed. Freeze, freeze, freeze for all of eternity, it prayed. That prayer was strong, so strong that even the ice had its heart frozen solid.

By the time the blue rose laid down its life within the ice, the ice, too, spoke or thought no more. All that remained on the intensely cold summit was the ice, whittled narrow like a sword as all of its tears flowed, and a single blue rose shut away within it.

That might have been the dream Eugeo saw in the Great Library Room. He had absolutely no idea how crudely shaped ice could turn into an actual sword or how it moved to the underground cave from the summit and got protected by the white dragon, and in the first place, he doubted some mere mass of ice or rose could possess hearts.

However, even if it was a dream, the ice's plea remained vividly within Eugeo. To freeze everything; the sorrow; the pain; even their lives and time—it prayed.

…Grant me power, Blue Rose Sword!

A new cry came from Eugeo's mouth the moment he strongly wished for that.

"*—Release… recollection!!*"

The second stage of the armament full control art. The ceremonial phrase to release all of the strength slumbering within the sword, the command to «release its memories». Cardinal had said it was too early for Eugeo to use it, but now—it would work now and only now.

The sword in his right hand shook violently.

Immediately after, numerous rigid cracking noises reverberated throughout the whole of the huge bath like countless panes of glass shattering. With Eugeo's right hand as the nexus, a bluish-white circle of light expanded at high speed. Any hot water that came in contact with that instantaneously froze, remaining in the form of a ripple.

Despite how the whole of the vast bath had been frozen pure white, it had merely been several seconds. Eugeo gasped at the absurd chill engulfing his entire body that was now rendered utterly immobile. It wouldn't be this cold even if he stood stark naked in Rulid Forest in the dead of winter. He wouldn't even be able to tell if it was ice on his skin, or scorching iron, if he were to close his eyes.

He wanted to wipe away the white frost clinging to his eyebrows, but he held down Bercouli with his left hand deep in the bath and kept his reverse grip on the Blue Rose Sword with his right, both firmly stuck where they were. Reluctantly blinking with all he had and shaking off the ice crystals, Eugeo confirmed the enemy's state through the dense mist.

Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli had half of his neck sunk within the ice. Due to his attempt to get up a moment ago, both his left hand and his right hand, that should had been holding onto the Time Piercing Sword, were deep in the bath, near the bottom. With that, he could move no longer, just like Eugeo.

Brittle chimes ringing out from the small icicles hanging off his eyebrows and hair, the knight commander groaned.

"I didn't think there would actually be a swordsman who would throw his sword away in front of an enemy… You're the one who came up with this fighting style?"

"…No. My partner taught it to me. That everything in a battlefield can be used as a weapon or a trap."

Eugeo somehow replied with his mouth stiffened from the excess cold. Bercouli momentarily closed his eyes and mouth as though he was thinking about something, but soon showed a brazen grin. Loose fragments of ice fell from his mouth.

"Hmm, I get it. Using what's there, huh… Well, I'll admit you got one up on me, but I can't just lose like this."

He took in a breath and held it.

What could he be planning at a time like this; that weighed down on Eugeo's mind. He would have to immediately prepare a counter in the off-chance of him starting a chant for a sacred art.

Bercouli's light blue eyes flashed open. From the space between his teeth, bared like a beast, a ear-piercing shout rang out.

"Nuuuuuuuhn!!"

Numerous thick blood vessels surfaced upon the knight commander's brow at once. Several bunches of muscles stood out on his slightly exposed neck, dying his skin bright red.

"Wha…"

Eugeo couldn't help but to let out that surprised cry. Bercouli was recklessly attempting to break through the thick ice with the strength of his muscles alone.

That couldn't be possible. Even with unrestricted movement and sufficient space, a mass of ice of such thickness should be difficult to shatter with bare hands. Let alone with the knight commander's current condition, stuck in place without even a hair's breadth to move.

Those clenched white teeth grinded together, producing a noise like creaking steel. Those blue eyes wore an intense brilliance, as though they radiated light themselves.

Despite engulfed in a chill below freezing point, a shiver beyond that stroked along Eugeo's spine.

Right after which a faint, yet decisive noise rang out.

A crack was produced in the ice separating the pair. Another diverged from that. And continuing on, yet another.

Eugeo was once again forced to understand that the giant man before his eyes was no mere human. He was one who stood on the summit beyond the valiant group of integrity knights picked from the best swordsmen among the four empires—the strongest man of the Human World. He had probably spent a hundred or two years' worth of time in the midst of battle; a living legend.

A battle against such a foe did not allow for even an instant of negligence. Eugeo had never really believed the battle could end just by freezing the enemy and himself in ice, from the very beginning. His true aim lay beyond—to force it into a mutual struggle for Life.

Firmly holding his beloved sword by its grip below the ice, with it still in its recollection released state now, Eugeo sharpened his senses.

If the memory Eugeo had seen proved true, the Blue Rose Sword possessed a slightly different origin when compared to Kirito's black sword, the knight commander's Time Piercing Sword, or Fanatio's Heaven Piercing Sword. That would be how there were two existences who served as the roots for the sword. The eternal mass of ice and the single rose shut away within it.

The mass of ice's ability froze everything and anything. And the rose's ability—made life blossom.

"Bloom—Blue Rose!!"

Responding to Eugeo's scream, countless flower buds came to life on the ice surface. They opened apart while rotating, spreading out blue, razorlike petals that were faintly translucent.

Led by a single rose, blooming with a chime resembling that of a bell, countless —beyond several hundreds—roses bloomed one after another. It was an extraordinarily beautiful, yet ruthless sight. After all, these enormous roses were only fully bloomed by absorbing Eugeo's and Bercouli's Lives.

Energy left his limbs and even his vision began to darken. He no longer had any tactile sensation from the ice on his skin, let alone the chill. He could only allow the paralyzing numbness engulf his entire body.

Powerful as he was, even Bercouli would now have had the strength needed to smash the ice prison sapped away from the root; his red-hot skin visibly turning white, its color draining away. The composure vanished from his manly facial features for the first time since the battle began.

"You rascal… don't tell me you've been aiming for a draw… since the start, boy?"

"Don't… get me wrong."

Giving his all to lift his increasingly heavy eyelids, Eugeo forced out a hoarse voice.

"There is only one thing I have a hope of winning you in… That is… our amounts of Life. Fanatio-san sustained nearly the same amount of injuries as my partner and they collapsed at the same time… in other words, even if you integrity knights don't die from old age, your amount of Life is no different from ours… am I right…?

Even as his mouth moved, sparkling beads of light flowed out from the ice roses that continued blooming. The fact that he hadn't been hearing the thunderous roar of hot water pouring down for a while now must have been proof that even those spouts were frozen.

Thick ice had already encased both Bercouli and Eugeo without anyone's notice, leaving alone only the center of their faces. If their Stacia Windows were to be opened, one should be able to witness their Lives reducing at a terrifying rate. Enduring the growing impulse to sleep, Eugeo desperately continued speaking.

"…Based on your appearances, you must have been over forty when you became an integrity knight… naturally, your maximum Life must have went down. In comparison, my Life have been approaching its maximum… even if I suffered a single sword blow, I should still have more. That was what I bet on."

Bercouli's two eyes flashed open hardly any time after Eugeo finished speaking. His whole face distorted severely, breaking the icicles hanging from his brow and nose all at once.

"Boy… what was that just now?"

Despite how difficult it must be to continue maintaining his consciousness in such a situation, an intense light surfaced in the knight commander's eyes.

"**Became an integrity knight**… you said…? Why are ya mouthing off like ya know what we were like in our last lives?"

Eugeo blinked once before scraping together what strength he had left and replied.

"That's… what I can't forgive about the lot of you."

The strong emotions swelling from the depths of his mind made him forget about the despair his whole body was in, even if it was for a mere instant.

"Forgetting all about who you were… dedicating your sword to the Axiom Church without even knowing its true form… putting on that facade that insists that you're justice, that you're the one who enforces the law. …You aren't some holy knight summoned from the Celestial World by the highest minister. Your mother gave birth to you and gave you the name, Bercouli, you're a human just like me!"

It happened then, in the particular moment when he shouted that out—

Eugeo finally recalled «who» was the giant man in front of his eyes.

The overwhelming surprise squeezed a short gasp from him. Bercouli… that was the name of that individual who appeared in that old story he heard from his grandfather when he was young. The renowned swordsman who founded Rulid Village **three hundred years ago** and became the first guard leader. The hero who went exploring the cave at the mountain range at the edge and tried to steal a precious sword from the sleeping white dragon's side… the Blue Rose Sword Eugeo was holding onto right now.

He pondered if this was a descendant of the original Bercouli, bearing the same name, but refuted that instantly. The integrity knights, who have had their natural reduction of Life frozen, would not age. In other words, this was the man himself. The main character of that fairy tale, "Bercouli and the White Dragon of the North", he loved as a child… and one that he could recall no longer than that summer Alice was taken away, was now before Eugeo's eyes. With his memories of his time in Rulid lost, and as an integrity knight.

Recovering, somehow, from the ephemeral yet immense shock, Eugeo spoke in faltering words.

"…Bercouli. You… should remember seeing my sword somewhere."

The Blue Rose Sword, now with all the strength it held awakened, continued shining a cold light roughly ten cen beneath the ice surface.

The commander of the integrity knights, also the main character of that fairy tale from three hundred years ago, lowered his gaze to glance into the ice. His burly chin went rigid and he forced out a hoarse voice from between his clench teeth. However, Bercouli's words betrayed Eugeo's expectations.

"…That's right… somewhere… —Back then… that time…"

His once-closed eyelids gently raised and the integrity knight commander spoke.

"—A sword like that was in the nest when I killed the guardian dragon of the north…"

Assault by another wave of shock, he blurted out his words, the thought of the chill freezing over his entire body momentarily leaving him.

"You killed… it…?"

The scene Alice and him witnessed when they explored the northern cave together eight years ago resurfaced in his mind.

Those countless, giant bones stacked up in that spacious area at the heart of the cave. Sharp wounds were carved into them from all angles. Injuries caused by neither the tusk nor nails of beasts, but by a sword swung by human hands.

"Those dragon bones… You're the one who did that…? You… even killed the… dragon who appeared in your own story…?"

Not restraining the feverish emotions welling up in his chest despite the cold cutting through his whole body, Eugeo viciously shook his head. Something ran from his two eyes as well, blurring his vision.

"So you've truly forgotten… anything and everything… Bercouli, you're a hero who everybody knew about in the village I grew up in, Rulid, whether they're old or young. You made the long and harsh journey to the north from the central and founded a village in the wild lands, you're our ancestor. The highest minister captured you, sealed away your memories, and made you the first integrity knight. You aren't the only one, Fanatio-san's the same, Eldrie-san too, and even Alice… it happened to everyone. Before they were made into integrity knights, everyone were the same as us… every one of them was human…"

"Sealed away… my memories, you say…?"

Bercouli's eyes, that had proved utterly unwavering throughout the battle, lost their focus as though they were looking towards somewhere far away. A soft voice, barely audible, streamed out from his mouth that lost its strength.

"……I can't quite believe in your story so easily… But… I also thought… the story about me being summoned from the Celestial World as a knight of the gods… didn't cut it for a long time…"

All of Bercouli's strength had already left him since some time ago. Frost settled in layers over his manly features once again. The tears flowing down Eugeo's cheeks, too, froze before long and they were absorbed into the layer of ice encroaching over his face, vanishing.

The fairy tale he had heard countless times since he was young, of Bercouli and the white dragon. The reality that the hero who served as its lead had killed the dragon who served as the other main character brought an indescribable sense of loss and futility to Eugeo.

The highest minister, Administrator, had strength far beyond what he could imagine. After all, she could manipulate even some great swordsmen with ease, turning them into her loyal knights. She might not have been an existence two mere swordsmen-in-training could have hoped to deal with in the first place. The highest minister… and the Axiom Church too.

Eugeo sensed, somewhere in his head, that barely any of his Life that the ice roses continued absorbing remained within himself. Bercouli was the same. Those half-open, bluish-gray eyes beyond the frost had nearly all of its light vanquished.

—It's a tie?

The moment he thought so, a minor spark flickered to life in the depths of his chest, the desire to not fall here and now. But he couldn't even move a finger. The strength began to gently leave his right hand, gripping onto the Blue Rose Sword under the ice…

It was then.

"Ho-hooo, sublime, simply sublime."

A grating voice, like scratching a fork across a metal plate with strength, rang widely throughout the large bath.

Eugeo moved his hazy eyes and saw a queerly formed silhouette swaying along the pathway as it approached.

It should be a human, but excessively round for one. Its torso, that swelled out in a perfect circle, had comically short limbs attached to it. Its neck was absolutely out of sight and a head, round as well, sat directly atop it. It appeared just like those snow figures kids built in winter.

However, the clothes it wore were so richly colored, it hurt to look at them. Clad in a lustrous costume that was deep red on the right and deep blue on the left, its lavish stomach had golden buttons that could hardly hold on. Likewise, its trousers were differently colored on the left and right and that attention to detail stayed the same for even its shoes.

There wasn't a single strand of hair on its round head and a golden angular hat sat on the smooth top. Its shape resembled the hat that Cardinal, the sage from the Great Library Room, wore, but was far worse taste. And to add on, its height was no more than a little over a mel.

A similarly dressed jester balancing on a ball was among the troupes of performers that showed off various acrobatics in Centoria's sixth district's plaza during the midsummer festival. However, it was evident enough from his facial features that the small man had no such smoothing qualities at all.

He couldn't put a figure on the man's age. His skin was bizarrely white, his nose was round, his cheeks were loose, and his unreasonably red lips split into a split in a wide smirk. His eyes were long and narrow in a crescent shape, arching upwards as though they were laughing, but the glint in those eyes peeking from those slits were abnormally cold.

The jester clad in red and blue skipped as he crossed the marble path, then jumped down onto the frozen bath with vigor. His shoes, pointed at their ends, crushed two ice roses with a splintering noise.

"Ho, hoo! Hoo, hoo, hoo!"

Apparently having found something hilarious, the small man clapped his hands and laughed a squeaky laugh for a while, then began kicking about the roses around, turning them into specks of glass one after another. Making a ruckus as he continued scattering those specks, he approached Eugeo and Bercouli who were captured within the ice.

Standing still several mel away, the small man kicked one last rose to pieces before finally turning his face towards them. Those red lips opened widely and that unsettling voice reverberated yet again.

"Oho… unacceptable, this is simply unacceptable, Sir Knight Commander. I don't suppose you thought you could just kick the bucket like that? That would be clear treachery, you know, towards Her Eminence, the resplendent highest minister. I'm sure she'll be outraged when she awakes, you know?"

To that, with his consciousness seemingly on the verge of fading, Bercouli's lips quivered and a low and hoarse voice flowed out.

"Chief Elder… Chudelkin… Don't get involved in a battle between swordsmen… you snob…"

"Hoo, hohoo!"

Upon hearing Bercouli's words, the small jester skipped three steps while loudly clapping his hands.

"Swordsmen! Battle! You make me laugh, hoohoohooo!"

That shrill laughter that didn't seem like that of a human spread out.

"You sure can speak, after even so generously going easy against a filthy traitor! Sir Knight Commander, you haven't used the «other side» of your Time Piercing Sword yet, have you? You could have killed that brat before he could get a word out if you felt like it! That's what I meant by treachery towards the highest minister in the first place!!"

"Shaddup… I had… fought with all I got… Besides, you lied to me, didn't you… This rascal… isn't some assassin from the Dark Territory… He's way better than some ugly lump of meat like you…"

"Shuuuut your moouth! Or I'll pull out your haaaair!!"

His two eyes peeled open widely all of a sudden and the small man hopped up and down like some ball, then stomped hard on Bercouli's head with his short legs. Swaying left and right atop the knight commander's head, he continued screaming in his shrill voice.

"In the first place, it's because you shitty knights do such a shitty job that it ended up this troublesome. You made me laugh so hard when you guys got beaten up by just two kids that my stomach's splitting. Once Her Eminence awakes, I'm sure every single one of the knights… or at least, both you and the deputy knight commander will be reprocessed!"

"What… you, just… what did you…"

"Ah, geez, shut up, shut up. That's already out of you, go to sleep."

The small man stuck out his little finger on his right hand out in an exaggerated gesture while riding on Bercouli's head. Licking his lips with his deep red tongue, he began a sacred art chant at a piercing pitch.

"*System caaaaall! Deep freeee—eeze! Integrator unit, ID zero zero oneeeee!*"

It was a sacred art he had never heard before. The art itself was unusually short and even if it was an offensive art, it wouldn't have any great effect—or so he thought.

"Guh…"

Bercouli moaned weakly. Immediate after, his body—his hair, his skin, even the clothes he wore, began increasingly dyed in a dim, gray color. Rather than being frozen, it appeared like he was turning to stone.

Light completely vanished from his two eyes and his body, bound by ice, changed to a mud-like color from its edges, before the small man—the jester called Chief Elder Chudelkin—finally jumped off Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli's head with vigor.

"Hoh, hohi, hohihi… actually I have no need of some geezer like you anymore, you know, number one. I mean, I've found a pawn who seems like he'd be pretty useful… haven't I?"

The jester muttered so as his pinhole, small eyes glared fixedly at Eugeo. Fear, colder than the ice surrounding him, ran down his spine.

However, Eugeo reached his limit then. He desperately stared at those red and blue shoes approaching as they trampled on the ice roses, but that scene immediately faded out into a dim darkness.

—Kirito.

——Alice…

Eugeo’s consciousness was severed as he called out their two names in the depths of his chest.

Chapter 11
The Secret of the Chamber of Elders
5th Month of Human World Calendar 380

1

My two eyes flashed open upon the onslaught of a sudden, violent shudder.

I had only planned on shutting my eyelids with my back against the wall, but I suppose I must have fallen asleep sometime. I had forgotten any details of that scary nightmare I saw the moment it rattled me awake… or so the lingering fear and unease clinging on in my head seemed to imply.

I briefly checked out the surroundings while rousing my upper body, but there appeared to be no difference from before.

I was atop a narrow terrace created on the outer walls of the Central Cathedral, probably around the eighty-eighth floor. The sun had sunk beyond the horizon in front for quite some time and the darkness covered the skies as though ink had been smeared over it. However, no matter how much I scanned through, I could see only multiple stars through the gaps in the clouds, lacking of the moon I impatiently awaited. I seemed to have heard the night's eight o'clock bell a while ago, but it appeared it would still take more time before the moon goddess would begin resupplying the meager space resources she could.

Integrity Knight Alice, having agreed to a truce, might be expressing her wariness of me through physical distance as she sat, hugging her knees with her eyelids shut, at a position on the verge of entering a new gargoyle's… no, «*minion*»'s reaction range if she went any further to the right. I personally hoped to grab hold of a clue to avoid that approaching battle, even by a little bit, through conversation in this lull, but it appeared she had no intention of being receptive to idle chatter. The problem would have been settled by simply pricking Alice with the dagger carefully produced by Cardinal and held by Eugeo if only he was here, though.

And just what was he doing about now—?

Now that I thought about it, in these two years ever since I met him in the forest south of Rulid, this might be the first time we had fallen into such a situation that we were barred from meeting each other regardless of our wills. We lined up on the grass or complained as we equally shared a narrow bed in some cheap inn during the long journey until we reached the capital and were always in the same room in the dormitory even after we enrolled in the Sword Mastery Academy. We spent time together as though it was a natural thing to do and I hadn't been deliberately conscious of his presence, but being separated was strangely irritating.

No— It was beyond what a simple word like that could describe, I know for sure.

In this ultimate virtual world called the Underworld, I gained someone of the same gender whom I could call a close friend for what was likely the first time in my life. It was certainly embarrassing to state it out, but I couldn't help but to admit it.

Before getting imprisoned within the death game, SAO, I had considered the male students of my school childish and had always kept them at a distance as mere associates.

That incurable tendency of mine didn't change much even when imprisoned in that floating castle in a virtual world. Fortunately enough, I managed to befriend several extremely matured adults such as Klein or Agil, but still, I doubt we had reached a level of intimacy where I could expose the depths of my being. Even despite my deep intimacy with Asuna, the only time I could expose my inner weaknesses was right before Aincrad crumbled away, when both of our consciousness were on the verge of disappearing.

It wasn't like I thought that I possessed some special ability unlike others or anything of that sort. In actual fact, there was nothing I could boast of in school, both athletically and academically.

Due to how I was able to count my rank among the top few percent, comprising of the clearing players, when taken captive in SAO, I must have been fascinated by the pleasure that came with excelling. The primary factors that boosted me among the top players were my «familiarity» from continual indulgence in VR worlds since fulldive-type games were developed and my «knowledge» accumulated from my time in SAO's beta test, things utterly unrelated to my personal capabilities.

However, even after getting released from SAO, I couldn't maintain myself, my persona, without continuing to prove my «strength in VR worlds». I was imprisoned by the complex those around me had, of recognizing me more as the hero, Kirito, who cleared the death game, instead of the flesh-and-blood, feeble Kirigaya Kazuto; or rather, I couldn't even deny I might have been leading them on to do so myself. Despite how I knew in the depths of my heart, that perpetuating such bravado would put me further away from what truly mattered.

Hence, when I met Eugeo in this world and realized that I could comfortably stand before him without any pretension, as my real self, I was surprised and pondered on the reason.

Because Eugeo was an artificial fluct light unlike myself? Because he didn't know the hero of SAO, Kirito? No, that wasn't it. The greatest reason was definitely —because Eugeo possessed far more ability than myself in this Underworld, a world both real and virtual in a certain sense.

His natural talent with the sword was simply tremendous. No matter what was compared, be it our perception, our judgement, or our reaction speed, he would leave me, who had been through harsh battles in VR worlds, in the dust. If the circuit for combat mounted on my fluct light was said to be a silicon CPU from bygone days, Eugeo's would be the latest diamond CPU. I might still look like the mentor at the current moment, but that was merely because I had a larger wealth of experience and knowledge; nothing more than that. If Eugeo continued to improve at his current pace, the day our roles reverse wouldn't be too far off.

The extensive experience with combat burnt into my body ended up with that grand name, «Aincrad style», but I couldn't help but to feel a mysterious happiness and profound satisfaction when Eugeo absorbed it like water on sand. The «swordsmanship» that formed the foundations of my ego for a long time, despite me thinking it really wasn't anything more than a technique for games, seemed truly tangible for the first time only after it was refined and blossomed within Eugeo—I could even claim to feel that way.

If I could successfully solve all of the problems surrounding the Underworld and bring Eugeo's fluct light over into the real world, I would have him dive into ALfheim Online—the interface for light cubes was almost certain to be compatible with VR worlds based on The Seed—and introduce him to Asuna, Leafa, Klein, and the rest. As my first apprentice who had inherited my skill with the sword, and a close friend.

I couldn’t wait until that moment. I believe that moment would be the first time when those many people who had supported and helped out would be truly……

“Why are you grinning away?”

A voice suddenly came from the right and I blinked my eyes, putting a stop to my daydreaming.

Turning my face that way, I saw Alice gazing at me with a somewhat disgusted expression. I roughly wiped my mouth with the back of my right hand and spoke.

“No, I was just… thinking a little about things from now on…”

“You must be quite an optimist to make that sloppy smile from that, or perhaps just a fool. When even escaping from this stone ledge seems doubtful.”

As usual, a bitter tone. I didn’t know Knight Alice’s former personality, the Alice from Rulid, but if her character stayed this way even after her memories returned, I could easily imagine her locking horns with those like Sinon or Lisbeth if she escaped to the real world with Eugeo and I introduced them to my comrades.

There certainly was a mountain of problems to get through before that ultimate *good ending* from my daydreams could occur. The one with utmost priority would be to escape from this terrace filled with rows of those repulsive *minion* statues, but along with the deficiency of the space resources needed to create pitons and all, my willpower-and-stamina resources… or to be specific, the hunger tormenting my empty stomach, was nearly at its limit.

Inconspicuously pressing down on my belly with my right hand, I replied with the most serious face I could muster.

“I believe we should be able to continue climbing the wall when the moon rises. It’s not that hard as long as we can create *pi*… those wedges. And it doesn’t look like there are any more minions set up above…. It’s just that, putting aside the problem regarding sacred power, thinking about climbing this steep wall for another few tens of mel alone is making me feel so hungry, I’m getting dizzy…”

“…That’s exactly what I find irresponsible about you. It’s merely skipping a meal or two, what are you, a child?”

“Yeah, yeah, well, I’m a kid after all, I mean, I’m still barely considered as a growing child, you know? Unlike you amazing integrity knights, my Life will fall like a brick if I don’t eat.”

“I will state this first, but us integrity knights, too, get hungry and have our Lives reduced if we don’t eat!”

The corners of her eyes coldly raised and Alice declared so.

In that moment, a cute noise came from around the girl’s stomach and I couldn’t contain an unintentional, stifled laugh.

The esteemed knight’s face instantaneously turned red and upon seeing her right hand swiftly grab hold of her sword’s grip next, I retreated around fifty centimeters in panic.

“Wah, wait, I’m sorry! I guess that makes sense, you’re still living even if you’re an integrity knight. It’s only natural to get hungry if you’re living.”

Shrinking while lining together those artless words, I noticed the sensation of something being squeezed in the left pocket of my trousers. Thrusting my hand in, wondering what it could be, I recalled what it was upon my fingers making contact and gave thanks to my own wisdom and greed.

“Ooh, it’s assistance from up above. Look, I found something good.”

What I pulled out were two steaming meat buns. Those I stuffed into my two pockets when I left Cardinal’s Great Library Room. Half were shared with Eugeo and eaten for lunch, but I totally forgot about those left over. They were more or less squashed after those numerous fierce battles, but I couldn’t very well ask for the world in a situation like this.

“…Why do you have those in your pocket?”

Alice had an expression like she was stunned from the depths of her heart and took her hand off her sword.

“I hit my pocket and there were two meat buns.”

Using that phrase that Alice definitely didn’t understand* as a smokescreen, I quickly displayed the
«window» of the meat buns and confirmed that they still had much of their Life remaining. They looked shabby, but as they were created from those precious, ancient book objects by Cardinal, their durability were shockingly high.

That said, chewing on these now cold and tough meat buns as they were wouldn't bring out any taste. After some thought, I stretched out my left hand and chanted a command.

"*System call. Generate thermal element.*"

Even if it wasn't enough for piton creation, there was apparently enough space resources for creating a small thermal element as a unreliable, flickering, orange point of light appeared atop my palm. Bring the two meat buns held in my hands closer to the thermal element, I started on the next command.

"*Bur*…"

-st; before I could continue, a hand reaching out from my side like a flash of lightning pinned down my mouth.

"Mghh!?"

"What are you, a moron?! They would be charred black in an instant if you do that!"

After scolding me with eyes filled equally with anger, stupefaction, and contempt, Alice snatched the meat buns from my right hand. Aah; the moment I let out that miserable cry, the thermal element in my left hand, too, vanished as though it dissolved into the air. The knight didn't look at me any longer and brandished open her lithe left hand as she voiced out a melodious sacred art.

"*Generate thermal element… aqueous element… aerial element.*"

On three of her fingertips, from her thumb to her middle finger, appeared points of light, orange, blue, and green in color. I tilted my head in bewilderment over Alice's intentions before she continued processing the three elements in a complex manner with additional sacred arts and her fingers' movement. She first made a spherical swirl with the aerial element and made the two meat buns hover in there. Next, she threw the thermal and aqueous elements in too and the moment she touched them, she *burst* them.

Shuu! That sound rang out as the wind barrier immediately became blotted out in pure white. Though it appeared calm on the outside, scalding steam must be swirling within that barrier. I see, so this would cause the same effect as when using a steamer.

After around thirty seconds, the three elements finished their part and vanished as they scattered. The two meat buns falling onto Alice's hands from midair had swelled in a perfectly round shape as though they were just made, with warm steam rising from them.

"L-Lemme have one already… wait, a-aaaah!?"

Upon spotting Alice trying to down both of the meat buns held in her two hands as I reached my hand out, I let out a pathetic cry. But fortunately, the great integrity knight stopped right before it reached her mouth and muttered "I'm joking" with a rigid face before presenting one to me. Snatching it while feeling relieved, I blew on it before taking a big bite into it.

Every existence in the Underworld was like a dream, relived from one's extensive memories—my mind understood that, but the texture of steaming bun's tender skin and juicy meat filling still momentarily invited me into paradise. The precious food ended up in my stomach—or to be accurate, a part in my fluct light's memories in merely three bites, and I let out a deep sigh while tasting both a sense of satisfaction and a sense of dissatisfaction at the same time.

By my side, Alice, too, downed her meat bun in four bites and a doleful sigh escaped from her just like me. While feeling a profound emotion over how this amazing integrity knight who was like an avatar of battles had a somewhat girlish side to her too, I nonchalantly spoke.

"I see… I didn't think it would be possible to steam a meat bun with just elements and no other tools. I guess that's just as expected of the big sister of that Selka and her skill at cooking, don't you…"

It happened in the moment I said that aloud.

The hand reached out at a ferocious speed once more and strongly gripped my nape. However, this time, Alice's face expressed neither bewilderment nor contempt.

An intense light surfaced in her blue eyes like fireworks, her cheeks tinted pale-white, and her lips trembled slightly. Practically lifting me up with her right hand alone, the knight let out a hoarse voice.

"You, what did you just say?"

Here, I finally realized what a horrible slip of the tongue I had made, far too late.

There was nearly no mistake that the golden integrity knight glaring at me from twenty centimeters away was Alice Schuberg, Eugeo's childhood friend and the elder sister of that sister apprentice from Rulid, Selka, but the person herself had no recollection of that. The moment she was taken away to Central Centoria eight years ago and made into an integrity knight through the «Synthesis Ritual», she would have had an important fragment of her memories stolen away and a «piety module» inserted in its place, becoming unable to recall anything from before the ceremony.

The current Alice believed herself to be summoned from the Celestial World to maintain the peace and order of the world, and to battle the invasion of darkness—no, she was made to believe so. To the girl, the authority of the Axiom Church and its highest minister, Administrator, was absolute, and there was probably no chance she would accept some story about Administrator kidnapping humans of high caliber from all over the world solely for the sake of satisfying her own desire to dominate.

In the first place, it was due to the expectation that Alice wouldn't be swayed no matter how hard we tried, that Eugeo and I decided on the plan of using the daggers bestowed upon us by Cardinal to send Alice into a temporary frozen state. The current situation was in no way expected, but still, there was probably only one thing for me to do—avoid the battle against Alice while re-uniting with Eugeo, and creating an opportunity to use the dagger he held.

Agitated over how I had destroyed that entire plan with a single line, I desperately racked my brain. It was clear upon seeing Alice's expression that this wasn't a situation I could play off by saying that I messed up on my words.

No matter how I thought, there were no more than two choices. Whether to fight with Alice here and now, and make her faint without landing a fatal blow, then carrying her up to the ninety-fifth floor—or to gather my resolve and tell her everything.

The choice I would pick would depend on what Alice could believe. A fight if I believed her skill with the sword to be inferior to mine. Or a conversation if I believed her intelligence to exceed mine.

Upon thinking hard for several seconds, I decided. Taking Alice's gaze, burning like a blue flame, head-on, I opened my mouth.

"You have a little sister, that's what I said. I'll tell you… I don't know if you will accept any of it, but I'll tell you everything of what I believe to be the truth."

Perhaps sensing a certain something behind my brief words, Alice was the one who hesitated this time, before abruptly opening up her right hand after several seconds had passed.

The knight continued kneeling on both knees as she fixed her stare down on me who fell onto the terrace on my backside. I suppose this act of listening to my words in such a situation alone would already be straying from the proper conduct of an integrity knight. Her reason, recommending that she end my life with a single slash, must be going through a bitter battle against her desire to gain new knowledge within herself.

Perhaps having steeled her mind, Alice eventually lowered her waist slowly and spoke after assuming what resembled a formal sitting posture.

"…Talk. But take note… if I judge your words to be any sort of deception, I will cut you there and then."

Hearing that low and stifled voice coming from Alice, I took in a deep breath and gathered strength in my core before curtly nodding.

"…Go ahead. If that judgement to cut me was truly made by your own self, that is. If you want to ask for the reason why I phrased it so… it would be because you have a instruction within yourself, passed down by someone else, yet hidden from your consciousness."

"…Are you talking about the duty of the integrity knights?"

"That's it."

The moment I nodded, Alice's eyes narrowed with hostility. However, at the same time, I spotted a faint wavering of emotion in the depths of those eyes. That was definitely Alice's true spirit. With the intent of directing my words towards there, I continued.

"The integrity knights are existences summoned by the goddesses' messenger, the highest minister of the Axiom Church, Administrator, from the Celestial World to preserve order and justice… that's what all of you identify as, I believe. However, the only ones who believe so are those within the Central Cathedral. The thousands of people living in the Human World don't think that the slightest bit."

“What… drivel are you spouting?”

“You can just go ahead and ask anyone at all, go down into the world and ask those living in the capital this. Ask them what’s bestowed upon the champions of the Four Empires Unity Tournament held annually. They will answer with this. The honor of being appointed as an integrity knight of the church.”

“Appointed as… an integrity knight…? That couldn’t possibly be true, that is simply ridiculous. I have been acquainted with a great many integrity knights, but not a single one had claimed to be once human.”

“It’s the other way round. There wasn’t a single one who hadn’t been once human.”

I straightened my back and peered into the knight’s eyes. I desperately cried out towards Alice’s human spirit that definitely laid in their depths.

“Alice. I believe you have no memories of who gave birth to you in that Celestial World place or where you grew up. Your first memory is probably the scene of Administrator looking towards you and telling you that you’re a sacred knight sent from there or something like that, isn’t it?”

“……”

It seemed I had hit the bulls-eye as Alice raised her upper body slightly while biting her lips.

“…That’s… because integrity knights have their memories of the Celestial World sealed away by the goddess, Stacia, upon descending to this land and… can one day return to the sacred land once more after we carry out our duties as knights and obliterate all of those wicked beings of the Dark Territory… regaining our memories regarding our parents and siblings… that’s what the highest minister… had said……”

The golden knight’s resolute voice trailed off and vanished.

I understood in that instant. Integrity Knight Alice strongly sought memories of her family from the depths of her heart, even if she wasn’t self-conscious of it. That explained her sharp reaction towards Selka’s name earlier.

Picking my words with care, I continued the explanation.

"Administrator's words were true on one count. The knights' memories really are sealed away. But the one who did it wasn't Goddess Stacia, but the highest minister herself. And it wasn't the memories of the Celestial World that were sealed, but the memories of being born and raised among this world of humans. The same goes for the other integrity knights too, like Eldrie for example. He was born in a high class aristocratic family in Norlangarth North Empire, achieved victory in the Unity Tournament this year, and attained the honor of becoming an integrity knight.

"Those are… lies! How could have my disciple, Knight Thirty-one, possibly been born in one of those depraved upper class noble…"

"Listen here, Eldrie didn't collapse during our battle because he got cut. There weren't any severe wounds on his body, were there? It's because my partner remembered his original name, Eldrie Woolsburg, and ended up stimulating the sealed memories of his mother. Eldrie tried to remember his mother. But he couldn't no matter how hard he tried. That was only natural; those memories had been extracted from his soul by Administrator and kept safe on the top floor of the cathedral."

"…Memories… of his mother…?"

Alice's lips shivered slightly. Her two eyes drifted off my face and wandered through the air.

"Eldrie has… a human… a noble mother…?"

"It's not just him. Probably half of the integrity knights were experts with the sword who won the Unity Tournament and most of those should be noble children specially educated with swordsmanship since they were young. In exchange for entrusting their children to the Axiom Church, the nobles attain a generous amount of money, goods, and land. That arrangement had already been in place for over a hundred years."

"…I can't believe it… that story of yours is much too preposterous."

The golden knight, who had likely believed in a unblemished sanctity of the Axiom Church and integrity knights without the slightest misgiving, shook her head left and right like a child to reject the notion.

"The upper class nobles of the four empires… I cannot claim all of the aristocracy to be the same, but they are addicted to their languid, extravagant manner of living. That is the meaning behind our existences, we integrity knights are here to protect the Human World. And despite that… you claim Eldrie and the other knights were born out of those upper class nobles sunk in utmost depravity… that is impossible. I cannot possibly believe that."

"The depravity of the upper class nobles was caused by the high social position and the numerous privileges granted to them by the Axiom Church. But that's the exact reason why noble children can receive education in swordsmanship and sacred arts from childhood. In the remote regions, sacred tasks are bestowed upon child merely ten of year and they can't afford the luxury of time to practice something like swordsmanship… And the most talented ones among those noble children participate in the Four Empires Unity Tournament and the sole victor is summoned to the Central Cathedral. …Alice, have you ever met any of those champions in the cathedral?"

Alice averted her eyes in slight unease at my question and softly shook her head.

"No… —But many ascetics and their apprentices live on the lower floors of the cathedral, so… couldn't the champion of the Unity Tournament be striving in daily studies as one of their numbers…"

No, they aren't. Immediately, I thought to deny it with that, but I closed my somewhat open mouth right away.

Eugeo and I had went through fifty floors without any detour—though we were dragged through twenty of those floors by the child knights, Fizel and Linel, paralyzed by their venomous swords—after taking back our beloved swords from the third floor of the cathedral without encountering any ascetics. However, I did have a guess on where their birthplace could be.

Most of those ascetics, likely on the lower floors of the cathedral only to toil away for the Axiom Church, were probably not adopted from outside the church, but were born and raised within it. Like Fizel and Linel. It would be like producing functional units within the tower from Administrator's point of view, wouldn't it?

Alice was definitely utterly unaware of the church's darkness. There was no need to broach that topic now and place an unnecessary burden on her.

"…No, you have met with them, with the champions of the Unity Tournament. You just weren't aware of it. You integrity knights should have your memories modified by Administrator's hand not just during the «Synthesis Ritual»… but also after becoming knights."

"Ridiculous!"

Alice clearly shouted with her face turned up.

"Impossible! The esteemed highest minister couldn't possibly commit an act like fiddling with our…"

"She did!"

I cried out in return.

"After all, not only do all of you not have any memories of the tournament champions… but also of those criminals you have taken in!"

"Cri-Criminals…?"

Frowning, Alice closed her mouth once again. Turning my gaze straight towards her face appearing pale under the starlight, I sped on in earnest.

"That's right. You brought my partner and I here to the church from the Sword Mastery Academy by flying dragon. I suppose you do remember that much, right?"

"…I couldn't possibly forget that. The two of you were the first criminals I was ever commanded to bring in."

"But Integrity Knight Deusolbert Synthesis Seven didn't remember about you. Eight years ago…"

After pausing for a short while, I gathered my resolve and stated «that name».

"…He brought someone here with his own hands from Rulid Village in the northern outskirts; he brought here the young Alice."

Alice's face turned whiter than the marble wall after she heard my words. Her lips, lacking in color, trembled and a parched murmur escaped from them.

"Rulid Village… I was born there…? Deusolbert-dono brought me from there as a criminal…? In other words, I had once committed a taboo… that is what you claim…?"

I gently nodded at her faltering voice.

"That's right. I said half of the integrity knights were champions of the Unity Tournament earlier, didn't I? The remaining half were humans brought to the cathedral as criminals. Those who possess a will firm enough to oppose the Taboo Index would manifest unmatched power after they became knights. It must be killing two birds with one stone for Administrator, being able to give those humans, capable of swaying the influence of the church, another life as her mighty pawns. …Let's talk about you."

Alice could accept my words or reject them. This was the critical moment.

I stared hard at the integrity knight with as much strength as I could in my gaze. Sitting onto the stone terrace with a plop and contracting her shoulders forlornly, Alice looked back at me with half-shut eyes as though awaiting some sort of judgement to be passed down onto her.

"Your real name is Alice Schuberg. Born and raised in a small village called Rulid in the remote northern regions, practically at the foot of the mountain range at the edge. You're the same age as Eugeo… my partner, so you should be nineteen this year. You were taken to the church eight years ago, so that means the incident happened when you were eleven. You went to explore the cave going through the mountain range at the edge with Eugeo… and after exiting it, you ended up going beyond it a little, over the border between the Human World and the Dark Territory. In other words, the taboo you committed was «Trespassing into the Dark Territory». You didn't steal anything or hurt anyone… no, rather, you tried to help a darkness knight on the verge of death back then…"

There and then, my mouth fell shut.

Had I heard Eugeo describe Alice in such detail…?

Of course he had. There wasn't any way I could had known exactly what happened a whole six years ago when I only woke up in the Underworld a mere two years ago. But despite that, I could vividly see the black knight falling while drawing a trail of blood and Alice running off there in my mind, as though I had witnessed the scene myself. It seemed I could even recreate the gritty noise of Alice's hands making contact with the pitch-black ground of the Dark Territory in the depths of my ears.

The scene I conceived from Eugeo's story must have mixed in with some memories of reality without my notice. I raised my face, convincing myself so, but it appeared Alice hadn't the composure to mind that unnatural pause in my words. Her bluish cheeks trembled faintly and a feeble voice flowed out from her, barely audible.

"Alice Schuberg… That is, my name…? Rulid… the mountain range at the edge… I can't remember, anything…"

"Don't force yourself to remember, you'll end up like Eldrie."

I cut into Alice's words in a fluster. It would be chaos if something happened like Alice's «piety module» becoming unstable and rendering her immobile like in Eldrie's case, inciting the other knights to come retrieve her upon sensing the abnormality. However, Alice glared at me with eyes that seemed to have regained some of their strength and spoke firmly even if her voice did tremble.

"What are you saying even after revealing so much. I… want to know everything. I have yet to believe your story… but I will make my decision only after you've spoken all that you have to say."

"…Got it. That said, it's not like I know that much about the old you. Your father's the village chief of Rulid and his name's Gasupht Schuberg. Unfortunately, I don't know your mother's name, but like I said earlier, you have a little sister. Her name's Selka and she should still be serving as a sister apprentice in the church in Rulid, even now. I chatted with Selka when I was under the church's care two years ago. She was a good kid who thought highly of her elder sister… you remained on her mind after you were taken away to the church. Apparently, you were also a sister apprentice when you lived in Rulid and you were called a genius in sacred arts. She was putting her all to follow in the footsteps of her elder sister, to become a splendid sister."

Alice showed no response even after I had spoken out all I knew and shut my mouth.

Her trembling from earlier ceased and her porcelain-white face didn't make the slightest movement. In all likelihood, she was trying to recall the numerous proper nouns I had voiced out from the bottom of her memories, but it seemed there was no chance for success there.

—So it was hopeless…

I muttered in my heart. I figured that it might be possible to awaken some memories, even with her «memory fragment» stolen, if I slowly gave her the information while she was in a calm state—but apparently, the seal Administrator applied possessed power beyond my expectations.

I guess the only one who could return Alice to her original self would be Cardinal with her supervisor authority. And that came attached with the catch of retrieving Alice's memory fragment that was being safeguarded by Administrator somewhere.

It happened then. Alice's lips moved, letting out a brief sound.

"Selka."

And following that, once more.

"Selka…"

This time, those eyes that appeared dark blue lifted towards the starry skies up above.

"…I can't remember. Neither her face nor her voice. But… this isn't the first time I called out this name. My mouth, my throat… my heart, they remember."

"…Alice."

I swallowed my breath and called out, but as though my existence wasn't reflected in Alice's eyes any longer, she continued whispering, quietly.

"They had called it out countless times. Day after day, night after night… Selka… lka……"

My gaze was fixed upon Alice in incredulity as clear liquid, forming into beads, occupied her long eyelashes and spilled over, glittering as they caught the starlight. Her tears flowed on without stop, softly falling onto the marble between Alice and me.

"It's true, isn't it… I have a family… A father and a mother… and a sister related by blood… somewhere under these night skies…"

That faltering voice eventually turned into a feeble sob.

I instinctively reached out with my right hand and was brushed off by Alice with the back of hers.

“Look away!”

Shouting that out with a teary voice, Alice harshly drove her right hand into my chest and wiped her eyes time after time with her left hand. But those tears made no attempt to stop and the knight eventually hugged her knees with both hands, pressed her face into them and her shoulders began to tremble violently.

“Uu…. ughh… uuu…”

Before I realized, something blotted out my two eyes as well, watching the integrity knight sobbing away in a stifled voice.

I will—

I will defeat Administrator and bring Alice back to her hometown.

Gathering my resolve once more, I finally realized the reason behind the tears surfacing in my own eyes, belated as it might have been.

Even if everything went according to plan, the one meeting with Selka at Rulid Village would not be this crying golden integrity knight before my eyes. The moment she regained her sealed memories, Alice would recall those days she spent with Eugeo and Selka in Rulid, and in all likelihood, forget the months and years she served as an integrity knight for the church.

In other words, this personality, Alice as an integrity knight, would simply vanish.

It would return to how things were meant to be. Though I tried to convince myself so, I couldn’t stop myself from pitying the knight sobbing away with her back curled up like a child.

A hopeless pity for Alice Synthesis Thirty who must have continuously longed from the depths of her heart for the warmth of a family, lost and beyond her reach, during the many years she lived in this cathedral.

It took quite a while for those violent sobs to gradually diminish in volume and turn into a quiet weeping.

I, on the other hand, had successfully stiffened my slackened tear glands two or three minutes ago and switched my thoughts on our plans from now on.

The most ideal outcome I could think of now would be as follows.

We would resume climbing the wall upon the rise of the moon and return into the tower from the ninety-fifth floor. Somewhat avoiding the planned battle against Alice there, we would join up with Eugeo. Whether we use the dagger he held, meticulously made by Cardinal, on Alice would depend on the situation.

After that, we would either have to defeat our greatest hurdle, Integrity Knight Bercouli Synthesis One, or convince him—it would be a great help if Eugeo had driven him away, but I suppose holding that hope would be too much—then charging into the highest floor of the cathedral, where our ultimate enemy, Administrator, sleeps.

We would render the highest minister powerless while she continued sleeping, take Alice's «memory fragment» that should be secured somewhere in the room, and return the girl's memories and personality.

Finally, I would establish contact with Rath's staff in the real world via the system console and get them to acknowledge the preservation of the current Underworld and the stop the incoming «load experiment phase»—in other words, the major invasion from the land of darkness…

It was a string of missions of extreme difficulty that made me feel faint just thinking about it. I couldn't help but think how every one of those goals had less than fifty, no, thirty percent chance of succeeding.

However, I couldn't stand not taking action any longer. That long, long period of time, this two years spent in the Underworld, no, perhaps ever since that day I logged in to the death game, SAO, instead, might have been all for me to meet with these new humans like Eugeo, and to gain a reason to protect them.

Kayaba Akihiko said this while gazing upon the collapsing Aincrad in the crimson sunset skies. That he wanted to create a true alternate world. I had no plans for succeeding that man's purpose, but what could be labeled a «true alternate world» was taking place right before my eyes.

«The Seed», passed down to me by the copy of Kayaba's personality made countless VR worlds germinate and bloom in the real world. And be it coincidence or inevitable, the light cubes storing the souls of Eugeo and the other inhabitants of the Underworld were compatible with the nexus of The Seed. If I sought some sort of significance from the SAO incident, beyond what Kayaba had been trying to achieve—I would definitely find it here, in this Underworld; that was what I felt.

I no longer had a path of return. After all, I had already come this close to the final goal, the highest floor of the Central Cathedral, spending a whole two years since I woke up in the forest south of Rulid.

However, if I had to bring up a pressing concern that I couldn’t ignore any longer, however insignificant it might be.

That would be the doubt if I truly desired to clear those many objectives from the depths of my heart; that would be my one and only question…

"…You've said this some time ago, haven't you?"

Hugging her knees with her eyes turned down, Alice suddenly muttered so.

I put a temporary stop to those complicated, entangled thoughts and lifted my face. A frail voice that still sounded blubbery came at me.

"After the tower's wall broke and we were thrown outside… you said that you had planned this revolt to correct the esteemed highest minister's mistakes and to protect the Human World."

"Yeah… I did."

I nodded towards the golden hair flowing down Alice's back. Several more seconds were spent in silence after that, before the knight slowly moved her lips.

"…I have yet to believe in everything you had said. However… it does seem to be the truth that *minions* from the land of darkness have been positioned on the outer walls of the tower… and that the integrity knights were not from the Celestial World, but gathered from the Human World with their memories sealed away. That is to say… I cannot deny that the esteemed highest minister have been deceiving us, her loyal servants, any longer…"

My breath stopped and I listened intently to Alice's words.

Integrity knights, with their memories removed and a piety module inserted into their fluct lights, should compelled into an absolute loyalty towards Administrator. Fact was, no matter how hard Eugeo and I tried to persuade them, none of the integrity knights we had met thus far could verbally express doubts towards the church.

With that consideration in mind, it was a real shock Alice could voice out what she just did. Did the girl truly possess something other artificial fluct lights lacked? I stared on without a sound, looking on as the golden knight continued talking in a whisper while holding onto her two upright legs.

“But on the other hand, it is true that the primary order given to us integrity knights by the esteemed highest minister was to defend against the invasion from the Dark Territory. Over ten knights are battling at the mountain range at the edge atop their flying dragons even now. If the esteemed highest minister hadn’t formed the Integrity Knight Order, the Human World would have already been assaulted by the forces of darkness.”

“That…”

—That, however, isn’t how the world was supposed to be.

The resources for growth monopolized by the integrity knight, or to put it in plain words, the experience points, were originally meant to be given to many of the commoners. Like what Eugeo and I had done in the northern cave, the villagers of the world should have picked up swords on their own accord and fought with the invading goblin soldiers, becoming stronger. However, Administrator had robbed them of that potential.

But she wouldn’t understand even if I said that now. Turning towards me who was at a loss for words, Alice sent forth a soft yet grave voice.

“You had said the village named Rulid, where I was born and raised… and where my parents and little sister still lives in even now, was at the northern boundary, at the foot of the mountain range at the edge. In other words, it will be devastated straight away if an invasion from the Dark Territory starts. Who exactly will defend all of the remote regions, including Rulid, even if the two of you defeat all of the integrity knights and put a knife to the highest minister’s throat? Don’t tell me the two of you plan on destroying the forces of darkness on your own?”

The tears from her two eyes hadn’t dried yet, but Alice’s voice had a genuine resoluteness in it and I couldn’t give an immediate answer. Compared to Alice’s barefaced determination to protect the Human World, there was far too much I kept hidden.

Enduring the impulse to confess everything here—including how this world was actually artificial, I opened my mouth.

“Then let me ask in return… do you truly believe that the Integrity Knight Order, fully prepared for an assault, can repel a combined attack from the forces of the Dark Territory without the slightest doubt?”

“……”

Alice was the one at a loss for words this time. I returned my sight to the night sky in front and continued speaking while reaching out for a memory from two years ago.

"I said that my partner and I had fought with a squad of goblins that trespassed from the Dark Territory, hadn't I? Even against goblins, the weakest troops of the forces of darkness, their swordsmanship and brute strength were to be feared. There are loads of them in the Dark Territory and on top of that, it's filled with those darkness knights who ride on flying dragons like all of you and darkness arts users with their minions, right? If all of them attack as a whole, even if all of the integrity knights head out, with the highest minister herself following behind, there's no way you would be able to defend completely with such a small army."

Ninety percent of those were handed down by Cardinal, but it appeared Alice was of the same mind as she didn't reply immediately as she always had. A short while was spent in silence before an anguished voice was wrung out, her face turned downwards.

"…True, even oji-sama*… even Knight Commander Bercouli seemed to have buried that same worry in the depths of his heart. The elite troops of the Dark Territory already number in the tens of thousands, and if they were to all march through the «Great East Gate», the Knight Order alone would probably not be able to hold them back, he said… —But even so, it's true as well, that the Human World does not have anyone with laudable combat ability aside from us. You mentioned that children from the upper class nobles were educated in the sword and sacred arts earlier, but they pursue the beauty of a single strike which would hardly hold up in an actual battle. In the end, there is no choice but for us integrity knights to battle on our few flying dragons, trusting in divine protection from the three goddesses. I believe you do understand the situation, don't you?"

"It's as you say… the Human World as it is now probably doesn't have a power capable of fighting against the forces of darkness aside from the integrity knights."

I carefully answered, still looking forward.

"But that's a situation brought forth by Administrator from her desires. The highest minister fears a power beyond her absolute control sprouting up in the Human World. That's exactly why she's gathered the champions of the Unity Tournament and offenders of the Taboo Index, sealed away their memories, and turned them into loyal knights. To put it in another way, Administrator doesn't trust the humans of this world, not the slightest bit."

"……!"

It seemed Alice sucked in a sharp breath. But she didn't immediately rebut like always. Praying that my words had reached the girl's heart, I continued piling them on.

"If the highest minister believes in the humans living in the Human World and form a well-equipped army, letting them have sufficient training, a force comparable to the Dark Territory's should exist in the Human World about now. However, the highest minister didn't. She allowed the upper class nobles, who should have been the first to pick up their swords when the time came to fight, to live their idle, indulgent lives, which then cause their souls to stagnate… Like those two Eugeo and I swung our swords at in the Sword Mastery Academy."

The incident where Raios Antinous and Humbert Zizek brought disgrace to Tizei and Ronie's modesty was a mere two days ago. If the load experiment phase had arrived without any change to the situation, and the Human World was exposed to a combined attack from the Dark Territory, countless of such tragedies would unfold.

"But… not everything is lost yet. There's still time until the Dark Territory's forces push in, though I don't know if it's a year or two… if the Human World tries its best to build up a large army by then…"

"Such a thing could never be possible!"

Alice finally shouted then.

"Haven't you just said so yourself? About how corrupted the nobles of this world are?! Even when commanded to take up their swords because a war is starting, the four imperial families and the upper class nobles are sure to merely pretend to obey while guarding their own lives and assets!"

"Yeah, sure, most of the upper class nobles probably don't have the guts to fight with the forces of darkness. But a part of the high class aristocratic families still retain their pride as nobles and there are plenty among the lower class nobles and the commonfolk who possess the will to protect their families and towns… and this world, at all cost. If the extensive amount of equipment amassed in this tower were to be all distributed among them and the integrity knights teach them their polished, real swordsmanship and sacred arts, it wouldn't be impossible to build up a grand army within a year.

"Common… folks…?

I nodded deeply towards Alice, muttering in amazement.

"That's right. Even if you don't force them to enlist and recruit only volunteers, I'm sure you could gather quite a number. I mean, there are already guard corps in the towns and villages here and there. But… if things continue as they are, this has no chance of being realized."

"……The esteemed highest minister… would never forgive it…"

"Yeah. It would probably be impossible to talk her around too. After all, an army that Administrator can't force into devotion towards her would be just as scary as the forces of darkness to her. To sum it up, it leads to one conclusion. We can only destroy the absolute control of the highest minister, Administrator, and make full use of the meager remaining time to build up a defense capable of going up against the incoming invasion."

Telling Alice so from her side, I couldn't help but feel a great cynicism.

The organization that created the Underworld and conducted this majestic experiment, «Rath», apparently seemed to be intimately connected to Kikuoka Seijirou, an active member of the Self-Defense Forces. In that case, the experiment's goal was unmistakably closely related to national defense in the real world. I could even imagine them making use of the artificial fluct lights themselves, like Eugeo and Alice, to control weaponry, for example.

Despite how I couldn't accept such a thing at all, I was currently proposing that we should train tens of thousands of the humans in the Human World into soldiers.

Not knowing a single bit of my ashamed inner thoughts, Alice had her mouth closed, likely for a reason separate from mine.

The girl must be weighing between her loyalty towards the Axiom Church carved into her soul with the words of an intruder whom she had arrested with her own hands. Despite her disciplined expression, she must be going through conflicts and distress beyond what I could imagine in her heart.

Before long—

A short line reached me, riding atop the night wind.

"…Can I meet them?"

"Eh…?"

"If I cooperate with you… and retrieve my sealed memories, can I meet with Selka… my sister again?"

I strongly bit down on my back teeth in that instant.

Meet. Meeting her wouldn't be a problem at all. But…

I was at a loss whether to tell Alice of my earlier prediction or not. However, I definitely didn't have to patch the situation up with some irresponsible words. Steeling my resolve, I first nodded.

"…You can. If you get on a flying dragon, it would just be a day or two to Rulid. But… please, I want you to listen to this carefully."

I stared hard at Alice's face as she sat around a meter and a half away on my right, and voiced out the continuation to my words.

"The one reuniting Selka will be you, but not you. The instant you regain your memories, you will turn back to Alice Schuberg, before you underwent the Synthesis Ritual, and Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty will vanish with that. Your current personality will disappear along with your memories when you lived as an integrity knight and you'll surrender that body to your original personality… This is cruel, but… you're currently «Another Alice», created by Administrator's hands."

Alice's shoulders jerked several times upon hearing my words.

However, she didn't fall into sobs. A few seconds later, a hoarse voice rang out, as though she was trying her best to restrain her emotions.

"…Ever since I heard that about integrity knights being created by the esteemed highest minister… I've been thinking it would be something like that. I had stolen this body away from that girl by the name of Alice Schuberg and unjustly inhabited it for six years… that's how it is, isn't it?"

I could no longer find any suitable replies. Despite the tempest that must be raging within her heart, Alice still showed a stout smile.

"What was stolen must be returned. That… should be what Selka, my parents, your friend… and you, yourself too, are hoping for."

"……Alice…"

"I just… have a single request, just one."

"That is…?"

"Before this body is restored to the original personality of Alice… could you bring me to Rulid Village? And even if it's while hiding… a single look is enough. I want to see what Selka… my sister looks like, and my family too. If you could grant me that much, that would be enough."

Cutting off her words, Alice slowly turned towards me and looked straight at me.

In that moment, the moon that had risen into the eastern sky without my notice suddenly sent down a single streak of light through the clouds. Alice's two eyes softened, red and puffy from crying like a child's, and smiled once more as her entire body was surrounded by specks of gold. I couldn't bear to look at that face any longer and turned my sight towards the moon overhead.

To return Alice her memories. That was the one and only desire of my unparalleled partner, Eugeo. In other words, going with that, it should also be my desire.

However, that would be the equivalent to the death of this integrity knight… no, this girl forlornly hugging her knees at my side. An unavoidable victim and an inescapable order of priorities. There were no more routes left to me.

"Yeah… I'll promise you. I'll swear on it."

While looking up at the night sky, I told her so.

"I'll definitely bring you to Rulid before your memories are restored."

"…Make sure that you do."

Turning my sight back towards Alice who underscored her request, I gave a clear nod.

The knight replied with a curt nod as well, before she took in a deep breath, put on an assertive expression, and spoke.

"Understood. Well, then… as of now, in order to protect the Human World and its residents, I, Alice Synthesis Thirty, will discard my mission as an integrity kni… gh… ah…!!"

The bold proclamation turned into a piercing scream all of a sudden. Her body, clad in that golden armor, bent backwards and her right hand pressed against her right eye. Was her ordered face being warped by some enormous, intense pain right now?

Despite my surprise, I instinctively recalled the scene I saw two days ago as I got up onto my feet.

Eugeo who sliced off the second-ranked elite swordsman-in-training, Humbert Zizek, in order to save Ronie and Tizei. By the time I ran in, his right eye had already blown off without a trace, the gushing fresh blood flowing down his cheek as crimson tears.

That night, Eugeo talked about it bit by bit in the academy's disciplinary chamber. The moment he tried to cut Humbert, his right hand froze as though it wasn't his own and his right eye burned with pain, he said. And before his eyes, unfamiliar sacred letters appeared, glowing deep red—

That same phenomenon Eugeo talked about might be assailing Alice right now. It was likely some sort of psychological block. Its trigger would be the act of opposing a regulation carved upon one's soul.

"Don't think about anything! Freeze your thoughts!"

I shouted so while approaching Alice and held onto her armored left shoulder with my right hand. And my left hand caught the tormented knight's right wrist, gently pulling it away from her right eye.

"……!?"

On Alice’s eye that should have been sapphire-blue, I saw a flickering red light and swallowed my breath. I peered closer in order to ascertain the true form of that light.

Upon the perfectly circular blue iris in Alice’s widely opened right eye.

Delicate lines were lined up in a radial pattern on the outside, glowing red while they slowly rotated. There was no fixed pattern to the lines’ thickness and the way they were ordered, too, was random. As though—it was a bar code.

I had guessed that the one who inserted this psychological block into the Underworld people was the highest minister, Administrator, ever since I heard the story from Eugeo. However, I had absolutely no memory of spotting anything resembling bar codes in these two years.

—It wasn’t done by Administrator…? But in that case, just who…?

It was then, when I let out a short gasp.

The circular bar code ceased its rotation and drew a horizontal list of strange symbols atop Alice’s contracted pupil. The string of characters that surfaced, glowing deep crimson, appeared to be [ꓕꓤꓭꓱꓐ ꓥꓢꓕꓴꓢ].

I was momentarily confused about what it signified, but immediately noticed.

It was mirrored text. Alice’s eye, directly under the line of text, should be seeing it in a horizontally flipped form. In other words, it said [*SYSTEM ALERT*].

System alert. To me, it was a familiar, unpleasant warning that popped out every now and then when utilizing a PC, but it should be a nonsensical phrase to those in the Underworld, like Alice. In this world, only the «Common Tongue» —which would be Japanese, was used in daily life, while English, «Sacred Tongue», was treated by most of the inhabitants as something that impossible and pointless to understand.

If one studied the sacred arts, though one would be able to chant various English vocabulary, starting from the initial «*system call*», I doubt that person would be too aware of the exact meaning the words held. I had taught Eugeo some of the meanings behind the names of skills for the secret moves of the Aincrad style, the sword skills, but he always found it strange how I possessed knowledge of the Sacred Tongue.

In short, this string of characters, *SYSTEM ALERT*, would hardly make any sense to the people of the Underworld. In other words, the one who inserted this psychological block into Alice, Eugeo, and the rest was no Administrator, but humans from the real world—namely, someone within Rath's staff; I suppose that would be how it was…

My rapidly whirling thoughts were interrupted by Alice's weak scream from point-blank range.

"Aaah… my right eye is, it's burning…! And… these are… letters…!?"

"Don't think about anything! Empty your mind!!"

Crying out in a fluster, I held Alice's petite face between my hands.

"What's happening to you is probably similar to a psychological barrier activated when you tried to oppose the church. It should be trying to urge you into absolute obedience by causing pain to your right eye… your eyeball will burst out if you continue thinking!"

SYSTEM ALERT

It only took a moment to explain that, but in this case, persistently insisting might bring about a reverse effect instead. No human could be disciplined enough to stop their thoughts when told to do so.

Upon hearing my voice, Alice shut her two eyes tightly. But the red words projected onto her eyes probably wouldn't disappear from just that. The knight's hands fumbled in the air and gripped onto my shoulders the moment they found them. My muscles grated from the force her monstrously strong hands put upon them each time a faint scream escaped her, but it was nothing compared to the pain Alice must be feeling.

Figuring it would help if I could calm down her thoughts, I shifted half of my thoughts to thinking up of any possible methods even as I firmly held Alice's face between my two palms.

Alice and several other integrity knights had already broken the Taboo Index once. After all, they were taken away by the Axiom Church and underwent the Synthesis Ritual because of that.

However, Alice, in particular, shouldn't have had her right eye burst off when she committed the taboo of «Trespassing into the Dark Territory» eight years ago. I hadn't heard anything of that sort from Eugeo. According to his explanation, the young Alice had apparently tottered over the boundary line without thinking. In other words, that would mean that a clear intent to commit a taboo wasn't in Alice's mind at that time.

The psychological barrier currently assailing Alice likely reacted to a proactive intent to violate a rule she was given. The moment one held such intent, the right eye would first hurt and the red *SYSTEM ALERT* would then throw the target's mind into disarray, planting a deeper awe for the taboo once again. Conducting a psychological barrier like this that could only be considered a work of god on the inhabitants of the Underworld who basically didn't break laws would likely cement their obedience to no end.

But if this psychological had been handed down by Rath's staff, it would bring up a huge contradiction.

After all, the goal of the experiment being conducted in this Underworld was likely the creation of artificial fluct lights capable of judging between the right and wrong of a rule they were given. Even after the people of the Underworld had tried so hard for a breakthrough, forcefully driving them back with such a slipshod, violent psychological block could only be considered as a mix-up in their priorities.

In other words, those who had inserted this *system alert* were purposefully impeding the success of this experiment—could that be it?

In that case, who exactly is that person and for what goal?

Heathcliff… Kayaba Akihiko's duplicated consciousness came to mind for an instant, but I immediately rejected that notion. He and his desire to create a true alternate world would not hinder the progress of artificial fluct lights. In the first place, such a heavy-handed method was not to that man's style. I suppose this had to be some influence or personal sabotage against that organization, Rath.

I could envision the existence of various hostile forces if the one directing Rath was the Self-Defense Forces member, Kikuoka Seijirou. For example, a group with internal opposition towards Kikuoka with in the Self-Defense Forces, a large company monopolizing the domestic defense industry, or if I let my imagination run wild, even a foreign arms manufacturer or intelligence agency wouldn't be out of the question.

However, if those humongous influences had planned to hinder Rath, would they take such an intricate measure? If they possessed enough authority to insert an interference program into the artificial fluct lights, couldn't they merely deal with it with haste and destroy the Light Cube Cluster, the true body of the Underworld?

In other words, that would mean that someone was intentionally delaying the experiment without the desire to completely wipe it out. Could that person be waiting for something by slowing down the experiment? Something on a large scale that required much preparation—for example…

The theft of the experiment's results, including the Light Cube Cluster itself.

As I reached that conclusion, horrified, Alice's weak voice suddenly came from between my hands.

"…Horrible…"

Startled back, I looked down at the integrity knight's face.

Her eyebrows that had always maintained a graceful line were pressed together tight, drops of water resided in the corners of her eyes, and she had bitten down on her lips hard enough to draw blood.

Those pallid lips trembled and let out disconnected words once more.

“This is… horrible… To have not just my memories, but my consciousness, too… be manipulated by… someone else…”

Gripping my shoulders, Alice two hands strongly shook with grief, or perhaps anger.

“The one… who burned these red sacred letters into my eyes… was it… the highest minister…?”

“No… I don’t think so.”

I unconsciously shook my head.

“It’s an existence that created this world and observes it from the outside… one among the «gods» that had not made an appearance in the lore behind the creation of the world.”

“…Gods…”

Clear drops flowed down from Alice’s eyes without a sound.

“So the gods would not trust us… even after we, the integrity knights, spent these countless days fighting without end to protect this world they had wrought. Taking my memories of my family, and my sister, and on top of that, performing such a seal upon me… forcing me into obedience…”

I couldn’t begin to imagine how much shock, confusion, and despair Alice who had lived as a knight of the gods must be feeling now. Alice’s eyelids suddenly flashed open as I looked on without saying a word, unable to breathe.

The mirrored, horizontal words on the blue iris of her right eye shone vividly even now. However, Alice appeared to pay it no heed, merely staring at the skies in front—at the bluish-white moon floating among the black clouds.

“I am not your puppet!”

However hoarse it might have been, Alice still shouted with dignity.

“Certainly, I might be an existence created by someone’s hand. But I have my own consciousness too! I want to protect this world… I want to protect the many people living in this world. I want to protect my family and my little sister. That is the one and only mission I will strive for!!”

The glow of the text in her right eye increased in intensity while letting out a piercing, metallic noise. The bar code etched onto the outside of her iris, too, began to rotate rapidly.

"Alice…!"

Expecting that phenomenon to happen any time now, I cried out.

Without turning her eyes towards me, Alice whispered in a stifled voice.

"Kirito… hold me tight."

"……Sure."

I couldn't do anything but nod. Taking my hands off Alice's face, I moved them to the armor on her shoulders. Strongly holding down the knight's body trembling in small jolts beyond that golden armor.

Alice shrugged her long, golden hair once, before proudly gazing up towards the skies and took in a deep breath.

"The highest minister, Administrator… and you nameless gods!! For the goals I must achieve… I will fight against you!!"

An unbounded proclamation that had a refined echo.

The moment it faded off, a deep crimson shaft of light left Alice's right eye.

A warm splash of blood stained my cheeks.

2

Eugeo.

Eugeo…

What happened?

Did you have a nightmare…?

An orange light ignited within the lamp with a soft sound.

Standing in the hallway, Eugeo had the lower half of his face buried in the pillow his two arms wrapped around and peered into the room through the slightly opened door as though he was hiding away his body.

There were two plain, wooden beds in the room that certainly couldn't claim to be spacious. The right one was vacant, with a freshly-washed bedspread laid folded there.

And a single, slender silhouette was upon the left bed, looking at Eugeo with her upper body raised. Her face couldn't be seen too well due to the light from the lamp her right hand carried. From her glossy, pure white sleepwear, a somewhat opened dress with a low-cut neckline, peeked her bare skin that appeared even paler. Her long hair flowing onto the bed seemed as soft as silk.

Those glossy lips, just noticeable beyond the orange light, showed a gentle smile.

It's cold there, isn't it? Come, come closer, Eugeo.

That softly lifted bedspread seemed filled with a viscous, warm darkness, making him all the more conscious of the freezing chill streaming through the hallway. His foot stepped across the doorway before he knew it and Eugeo headed towards the bed with uncertain steps.

The lamp strangely dimmed as he approached, concealing the face of the woman sprawled over the bed with a creeping darkness. But Eugeo's thoughts were simply filled with the desire to snuggle into that warm darkness and hungrily moved his feet. His steps became gradually wider as his viewpoint became gradually lower, but he didn't feel it to be strange.

The bed he finally arrived at was absurdly tall and Eugeo threw down the pillow he held onto, stepping onto it in an attempt to climb up.

In that moment, a soft cloth fluttered over him from the top and sunk his vision in darkness. As though urging on his craving, Eugeo crept deeper and deeper into that darkness.

His extended fingers came into contact with warm and supple skin.

Eugeo embraced it in a daze and buried his face into it. The silky skin gently squirmed, as though it was enveloping Eugeo.

Led around by that enthralling sense of satisfaction and a longing several times as potent, Eugeo fervently clung on. Feeling a smooth arm hugging his back and another rubbing his head, Eugeo asked in his small voice.

"Mother…? Is that you, mother?"

The reply instantly came.

Yes… I am your mother, Eugeo.

"Mother… My mother…"

Sinking ever deeper into the warm and damp darkness, Eugeo murmured.

A doubt floated up like a bubble, from a corner of the bog that was his mostly numbed mind, and popped.

Was my mother… ever this slender and soft? Why do these two hands that should have been working in the fields day after day not have a single scrape on them? And… have my father who should have been sleeping in the bed on the right went somewhere? Where are my brothers who always got in the sleep whenever I tried to get mother to pamper me…?

"Is it really… you, mother?"

Yes, Eugeo. It's your one and only mother.

"But… where is father? Where are my brothers?"

Hehe.

What a strange child.

Everyone

have already been killed by you, haven't they?

Suddenly, his fingers felt clammy.

Eugeo spread open his left and right hands, lifted before his eyes.

Despite the lack of illumination, he could clearly see the deep red blood stickily dripping off his ten fingers.

"…Aaaaaaah!"

Eugeo jumped up with that scream.

He was engrossed in scrubbing his two sticky hands against his shirt. Only after wiping them countless times while screaming out, did he notice the moisture on his hands was not blood, but merely sweat.

Was that a dream—even after arriving at that conclusion, he still took some time before he thought to restrain his heart, beating like an alarm bell, and the cold sweat seeping out from himself. The lingering memory of that absurdly terrifying nightmare clung to his back with no sign of fading.

—Mother and father… I hadn't even thought of them much since I left the village.

Muttering so in his heart, Eugeo closed his two eyes tightly and kept his breathing shallow.

When he was a young boy in Rulid, his mother worked on the fields, tended to the sheep, and even did the housework on top of that, hardly cuddling gently with Eugeo. They had slept in different beds even before he even achieved maturity and Eugeo had no recollections of being unsatisfied over that.

—So why did I see such a dream after all that…

Eugeo strongly shook his head and stopped his trail of thoughts. Dreams were up to the caprice of the moon goddess, Lunaria. This nightmare surely held no significance.

After his breathing had calmed down a little, the doubt over his current location bubbled up. He softly lifted his eyelids while still crouching.

What first entered his vision was a deep crimson carpet with an astonishing amount of density and an intricate pattern weaved into it. The carpet that he couldn't estimate the value of, if bought at the textile shop in the fifth district of North Centoria, stretched on and on in his vision no matter how he tried to find its end.

He finally saw the far away wall only after he looked straight ahead.

Even if it was a wall, it was made from neither wood nor stone. Golden pillars in the shape of gigantic swords stood at regular intervals with glass panes inserted between them. As such, it could actually be considered as a line of windows rather than a wall, but a room where valuable glass was used this freely couldn't be found even in the castles of the four emperors, could it?

Numerous clouds, dyed blue by the moonlight, were floating beyond the wall entirely composed of glass. This room was apparently higher than even the clouds.

He saw a bluish-white full moon floating in a corner of the night sky when he brought his sight up higher. An astonishing multitude of stars were silently flickering away around it. The light pouring down from the sky richly filled with stars was far too bright; he took a while before noticing it was the middle of the night. Judging from the height of the moon, it should be a little after twelve. The date had apparently turned while he slept and it was the twenty-fifth of the fifth month now.

Finally, Eugeo looked straight up. The ceiling drew a perfect circle far above and he couldn't spot any stairs to proceed to the next floor. That could mean that this room was the highest floor of the Central Cathedral.

The wide ceiling vividly depicted a splendid piece of art. Knights glittering with light, monsters being driven away, and a mountain range splitting the earth… it seemed to illustrate the story of creation. Each place even had crystals embedded there, sparkling like the stars.

But for some reason, the presence of what should have definitely been essential for the subject of the painting, Stacia, the goddess of creation, was not in the middle as she should have been. That section had been painted out pure white and what would be like a void ruled over the entire painting.

Eugeo frowned for a short while before turning back. Raising his upper body from his posture of crawling on fours, his back came into contact with something and he looked behind in a fluster.

"……!?"

Eugeo was at a loss for words, with his body still twisted. Right behind him was the side of an astonishingly humongous bed.

The bed, circular in shape like the room, seemed to measure close to ten mel. Four golden posts propped up the canopy, golden as well, and flimsy, violet drapes dangled off that, creasing over each other. A pure white sheet, resembling silk from the east empire, covered the bed and faintly gleamed with the starlight streaming in from the windows.

And—a single silhouette lay down in the middle of the bed. He couldn't see much more than vague contours, obstructed by the translucent, flimsy cloth hanging from the canopy.

Eugeo swallowed his breath and his body jerked up. He couldn't believe that he didn't notice someone else's presence, despite being so close by for these few minutes. No, before even considering that, he had apparently been sound asleep for hours, leaning against this bed. Just how did it end up this—

Getting to that point in his thoughts, Eugeo finally recalled the final scene remaining in his broken memories.

—That's right… I was fighting with that hero of that old story… with Knight Commander Bercouli.

—I was stuck to the knight commander by ice due to the Blue Rose Sword's «memory release art»… then that small man wearing those gaudy jester clothes appeared before our Lives ran out… apparently called Chief Elder Chudelkin, who said those weird things. Then he stamped over the ice roses with his shoes as he came closer… and after that…

It seemed his memories stopped there. That jester might have carried him here, but he didn't know why. He instinctively felt around his waist, but the Blue Rose Sword had disappeared away somewhere.

Bearing the sense of helplessness that assailed him in that moment, Eugeo focused his eyes towards the silhouette on the bed. Was it an enemy, or an ally… no, this was unmistakably the Central Cathedral, and likely the highest floor at all. Anyone in such a place couldn't possibly be an ally.

He figured it best to escape the room while muffling his footsteps now, but his desire to know the identity of the sleeping silhouette won out. However, no matter how high he stretched out, he couldn't see the face hidden behind the flimsy cloth dangling at the center of the bed.

Silencing his breath, he softly placed his right knee onto the bed.

Sinking deeply into the white silk sheet as though it was snow, Eugeo extended his arms in panic. Those hands, too, ended up sinking into the smooth fabric.

The terrifying nightmare from earlier vividly came back to Eugeo as he felt himself swallowed by the bed and his back involuntarily trembled before he quietly lifted his left leg onto the bed as well. Getting onto fours like that, he slowly, slowly headed towards the middle.

Cautiously crawling across the unbelievably massive bed, Eugeo couldn't help but imagine how much down of the highest grade had been tucked in, under the sheets. It took a whole half year to produce a single, thin futon after slowly gathering the feathers that came off the domestic duck reared in his family's rear garden back in Rulid Village, day after day.

Stopping his advance in front of the flimsy cloth dangling from the canopy for the moment, Eugeo shifted his attention to his ears. Though extremely faint, he could hear the regular sound of breathing. It seemed the other party still remained asleep.

Timidly, he reached out with his right hand. Sticking his finger under the flimsy cloth, he gently, gently lifted it up.

The moment the bluish-white light reached the middle of the bed, Eugeo opened up his two eyes.

A single female laid there.

Clad in light clothes in a shade of pale violet—the exact same color as the «Stacia Window»—and hemmed with silver thread, she had her pale, slender hands crossed over her body. Her arms and fingers were slim like a doll, but the two mounds propping up the flimsy fabric immediately above them were bountiful and he turned his sight away in panic. Her breasts, peeking out from her unreservedly opened neckline, too, shone white.

At last, Eugeo looked at the female's sleeping face.

A sensation like his soul being sucked out descended upon him in that moment and everything else left his vision.

How could it be so perfect? He thought it beyond the limits of humans. Integrity Knight Alice, whom he fought on the eightieth floor, had faultless good looks as well, but her beauty still remained within the realm of humans. That was only natural; Alice was human, after all.

However, this existence sleeping a mere mel away was—

Could the greatest carver in the capital even bring forth such artistry after an entire lifetime of effort? Eugeo couldn't find the words to describe even a sheer fraction of her beauty. Even if he tried to liken her lips to flowers, a flower with curves so lovely couldn't be found anywhere in the Human World.

Both those eyebrows framing her shut eyelids and her long hair flowing onto the sheets looked as though they had been casted in pure silver. They gave off a cold gleam, reflecting blue from the dimness and white from the moonlight.

Before he knew it, Eugeo had his rationality stolen, like a fly captivated by sweet honey.

Only the desire to touch these hands, this hair, these cheeks filled his emptied head.

When he languidly drew closer on his knees, a fragrance he had never smelled before softly drifted in the air.

The fingers on his stretched out right hand would reach in just a little… reach that smooth skin in a little bit…

You mustn't, Eugeo.

Run!

He heard someone shout from somewhere far away.

Small fireworks went off at the core of his mind and swept away some of the thick fog enveloping his consciousness. Eugeo opened his two eyes and instinctively drew back his right hand.

—This voice… where have I heard it before…

As he wondered so in a daze, his ability to think slowly returned to him.

—What… had happened to me…? What was I doing here…?

He lowered his gaze to the woman before his eyes to confirm the situation he was in and what resembled a viscous, deep drowsiness crept in his head once more. Averting his eyes in panic, he strongly shook his head in opposition.

—Think. Think.

—I should know this person. Someone sleeping alone on a lavish bed on the highest floor of the Central Cathedral. In other words, the one who holds the highest authority in the Axiom Church—not to mention the one who rules over everything in the Human World…

In other words, the highest minister, Administrator.

Eugeo repeated the name he finally recalled countless in his mind.

The instigator behind taking Alice away, stealing her memories, and turning her into an integrity knight. The mightiest sacred arts user who even the sage possessing immeasurable power, Cardinal, was no match for. The ultimate enemy of Kirito and Eugeo.

And that Administrator was sleeping before his eyes.

—Can I win… right now…?

He moved his trembling left hand towards his waist without thinking, but the Blue Rose Sword wasn't there. It was either stolen by the chief elder, Chudelkin, or perhaps still under the ice still covering all of that large bath. Even if the opponent was asleep, without a weapon, he couldn't…

No.

He still had one. A sword that was small yet mightier than sacred tools in a certain sense.

Eugeo moved his left hand from his waist to his chest and softly pressed down on his shirt's fabric. The distinct sensation of a hard cross made itself known to his palm. The final trump card bestowed by Cardinal.

If this dagger was stabbed into Administrator's body, she should be incinerated dead in an instant from the offensive art Cardinal would send in, bypassing space.

"……gh…"

But Eugeo let out a distraught sigh while gripping onto the dagger through the fabric.

This dagger should have been used on Integrity Knight Alice. Of course, not to burn her to death, but to put her to sleep through Cardinal's arts and to restore her memories, turning her back into the old Alice. If that couldn't be done, Administrator's defeat would serve no meaning to Eugeo. It might be possible to turn Alice to her old self without using the dagger if the highest minister was eliminated, but he had no assurance it would.

Seized by the doubt that lacked an answer, Eugeo heard the mysterious voice yet again while biting on his lips, and noticed.

Eugeo… run……

But before that voice that seemed far too distant could make its way to his consciousness—

The sleeping woman's silver eyebrows softly shook.

Those white eyelids slowly, slowly rose as Eugeo stared on in blank amazement. His vision was frozen in place, let alone his left hand, still holding onto the dagger. His ability to think, once restored, dispersed yet again and faded to nothing.

The woman closed her faintly opened eyelids for a moment, then gently blinked several times, as though to rouse Eugeo into action. And on the third time, those eyelids finally opened up completely.

"Ah……"

That sigh escaped from Eugeo's mouth without him realizing it.

The now-exposed eyes were pure silver, a color he had never noticed in any human's eyes before. Those mirror-like irises were tinted faintly in the brilliance of the seven prismatic colors, wavering as though on a water surface. A divine radiance that could make any rare gem in this world appear dull in comparison.

Before Eugeo's eyes as he stayed frozen like a statue while still on his knees on the bed, the awoken woman swayed upright with wispy movements. Upon rising as though pulled up by some invisible force with her two arms still left under her breasts, her long, silver hair also softly flittered despite the lack of wind and streamed tidily down her back as a whole.

The woman—or girl, who appeared slightly more youthful with her eyes now open lifted her right hand to her mouth as though paying Eugeo no heed and let out a small yawn.

Her legs that were stretched out straight turned towards the right together. The balance of her slender body lurched and her left hand struck the sheets to support herself.

The girl turned her face to the left at last, looking straight at Eugeo while maintaining that bewitching posture.

Her pure silver eyes, fringed by a rainbow radiance. He could hardly think of them belonging to a human, due to the lack of pupils residing within them. They were unbearably beautiful, but prevented all access deeper into her heart as they reflected all light like a mirror.

Upon gazing at his own dumbfounded expression projected on those two small mirrors, the girl's glossy, pearl grey lips made a slight movement. Her voice, sweet as honey and pure as crystal, with a hint of enticement, spoke.

"What a pitiful child."

It took some time for him to understand what was spoken. However, without becoming aware of the languor in his thoughts, Eugeo replied in a daze.

"Eh…? Pitiful…?"

"Yes. How very pitiful."

Throwing the hearts of any who hears it into disarray, it was filled equally with both an unsullied purity and the tone of a femme fatale.

Her glossy, pearl grey lips showed a faint smile as her honeyed voice flowed on.

"You are much like a withered potted flower. No matter how far into the soil you spread your roots, no matter how high you reach your leaves into the wind, you could not come into contact with a single drop of water."

"…A potted… flower…"

Eugeo frowned and tried to understand the significance behind those mysterious words. His mind was still enveloped in haze, but the girl's eyes summoned a stinging pain from somewhere within his heart.

"You understand. Exactly how much you thirst, how much you hunger."

"…For what…?"

His mouth moved without his acknowledgement and questioned in a dry, hoarse voice.

The girl stared at Eugeo with her reflective eyes and replied with the smile still on her face.

"Love."

Love… she said?

That's like… saying that I… don't know what is love…

"Indeed. You are a pitiful child who has never had the experience of being loved."

That couldn't be true.

My mother… loved me. Whenever I had a nightmare and couldn't sleep… she would hug me and sing lullabies for me.

"Did that love truly belong to you alone? It didn't, did it? It was actually what was left over after your brothers have taken their share, wasn't it…?"

She's lying. Mother… loved me, only me…

"You wanted her to love only you. But she didn't. That was why you hated them. Those who took away your mother's love, like your father. And your brothers."

Lies. I… I don’t hate my father or brothers.

“Really now…? After all, haven’t you sliced him up?”

……

Who…?

“The one who had loved you and only you for the first time; that red-haired girl… You had cut that man who tried to steal her by force and sully her. Because you hated him. Because he had stolen away what had belonged solely to you.”

No… that wasn’t why I pointed my sword towards Humbert.

“But it was no panacea for your thirst. No one would love you. Everyone had forgotten about you. You have been cast aside, no longer needed.”

No… no. I… I haven’t been cast aside or…

That’s right… she’s wrong. I have Alice.

The moment he recalled that name, the viscous haze shrouding his consciousness felt as though it had cleared up a little and Eugeo shut his eyes tight. It wouldn’t be good being swept into this flow, he had to get moving now; the sense of danger filling his mind whispered thus.

However, before he could move for real, the beguiling voice slipped into his mind from his two ears once more.

“I wonder if that really is true…? Does that child truly love you and only you…?”

That reverberation hid faint laughter under its compassion.

“You have forgotten. I’ll let you recall them. Your true memories, buried deep within the depths of your heart.”

Eugeo’s vision lurched in that instant.

The luxuriously downy bed faded and he fell into a dark, deep hole without end.

The scent of fresh, green grass pricked his nose all of a sudden.

Verdant light filtered through trees flickered in a corner of his sight while the chirping of small birds overlaid the sound of footsteps over the undergrowth.

Eugeo was walking deep in a forest when he became aware of his situation.

His line of sight was awfully low and his steps were short. His legs stretching out from his shorts made from fiber were those of a child, slender and weak, when he took a look downwards. But the sense of unease immediately vanished, overwhelming irritation and loneliness filling his chest in its place.

For some reason, he hadn’t seen Alice at all since the day started.

Upon finishing his morning work, tending to the cows and weeding the vegetable garden, Eugeo rushed as fast as he could towards the usual gathering spot—underneath an old tree outside the village. However, Alice didn’t come no matter how long he waited. In addition, neither did his other childhood friend, that black-haired boy.

After waiting for the pair until the sun climbed up to its highest place in the sky, Eugeo tottered to Alice’s home while feeling an indescribable emotion. She must have been found out after playing some prank and got stopped from going out to play. That was what he had thought, but her mother who greeted him there said thusly with her head tilt in confusion.

That’s strange, she went off rather early today. Kiri-bou came for her, so I was sure she would have been with you too, Eu-bou.

Mumbling his thanks and leaving the village chief’s residence, Eugeo felt his unease turn into impatience and searched around the village. However, though the central plaza occupied by the guard chief’s son, Jink, and his henchmen was a given, he couldn’t find Kirito and Alice at any other playing area or hiding place.

Only one other place came to mind. A perfectly round grass patch they had recently found deep in the eastern forest that the other children didn’t approach. It was a secret place for the three of them, called the «fairy ring» by the adults and filled with various flowers and sweet berries.

Eugeo desperately ran towards there, halfway on the verge of tears. His body set into motion by his loneliness, doubts, and one more emotion, one he couldn't fit a name to.

After running through the winding, small path, and reaching the secret, empty land surrounded by remarkably thick, old trees, a dazzling, golden light swayed in between the tree trunks in his path and Eugeo's feet jerked to a stop.

That was unmistakably the radiance from Alice's familiar golden hair. He instinctively silenced his breathing for some reason and pricked up his ears. Fragments of whispers, quietly exchanged, were conveyed to him on the wind.

Why… why?

With nothing but those words set on repeat in his mind, Eugeo walked closer to the vacant land with subdued steps. His heavy melancholy threatening to crush him, he hid himself behind the mossy trunk and peeked into the secret place flooded with light from Solus.

Alice was sitting in the center of the multicolored blooming flowers with her back to him. He couldn't see her face, but there was no way he could mistake her flowing, straight, golden hair, her deep blue dress, and her white apron.

And by her side was a head covered in prickly black hair. His one and only best friend, Kirito.

His clenched hands were soaked in damp and chilly sweat.

The fickle wind sent Kirito's voice to Eugeo's ears as he stood still.

"Hey… let's go back already. Someone will notice."

And replying to him was Alice's voice.

"It's still alright. Just a little… a little, okay?"

No.

I don't want to hear anymore.

But Eugeo's legs refused to budge as though the tree's roots had entwined around them.

In his sight he couldn't turn away, Alice's face softly approached Kirito.

He caught a shred of her quiet whispering.

The pair, snuggling together in the middle of flowers in full bloom, under the bright sunlight; it appeared just like a painting.

No.

Lies. These are all, lies.

Eugeo shouted out in the darkness. But no matter how he tried to deny it, his conviction that this scene was one dragged out from the depths of his own memories gushed up and streamed into his chest like cold water.

"You see… don't you?"

Sniff.

The whisper with a tinge with laughter wiped away the forest scene.

Returning to the gigantic bed in the highest minister's room on the top floor of the Central Cathedral, that golden radiance burnt into Eugeo's eyes remained even with his eyelids shut. Along with Alice and Kirito's whispering voices, echoing deep in his ears.

His voice of reason, that said he should have only met Kirito in that forest two years ago, long after Alice had been taken away to the church, failed to quench the dark emotions filling his chest. The girl with silver hair right next to Eugeo turned towards him with an expression filled with compassion as he opened his two eyes and let out ragged breaths.

"Now you understand, don't you…? Even that child's love did not belong to you alone. No… was there even any for you in the first place?"

The sweet voice sleekly slid into Eugeo, violently stirring up his thoughts each time. The boundless hunger and desolation clearly rising up within himself. The sensation of cracks rapidly spreading over his heart, flaking off and plunging down.

"But I am different, Eugeo."

Her most seductive voice thus far seeped into his ears, like the drifting fragrance from a fruit filled with copious nectar.

"I will love you. I will give all of my love to you, and you alone."

In Eugeo's vision as he opened his half-clouded eyes in a daze, was the girl—Administrator, the highest minister of the Axiom Church, with her glossy silver hair and eyes gleaming away, showing a bewitching smile.

Moving her legs that had sunk into the soft sheets, she straightened her upper body.

Slowly bringing up her hands, she appeared to fiddle around with the ribbon keeping her breasts in place on her light purple silk sleepwear.

Her flexible fingertips gripped the ends of the ribbon made from silver thread and pulled slowly, gently.

With more than half of her wide neckline exposed now, the graceful, white skin quivered as they lured him in.

"Now, come, Eugeo."

That whisper seemed both like the voice of his mother he had heard in the midst of that dream, and the voice of Alice that reached his ears in that illusion.

With his impeded consciousness, Eugeo stared at the thin, purple fabric fluttering down like flower petals around her dreadfully slender waist.

She was truly a flower—a large, devilish one that tempted and captured bugs and small birds with its ardent aroma and dripping nectar.

Although a part of Eugeo still felt that way, the allure of that flower, oozing from its pure white heart gingerly lingering amidst its violet petals, was far too intense and Eugeo's thoughts, smashed into pieces from the earlier illusion, were wholly drawn into the viscid fluid.

You have never been loved before; that was why you could truly feel satisfied with what you have.

Administrator had said so. And Eugeo had gradually begun to acknowledge an aspect of that as fact.

Eugeo himself could frankly say that he loved his parents, brothers, and friends in his childhood. Looking at his mother being pleased at the flower he plucked and watching his father and brothers enthusiastically eating the fish he caught made him happy. He would even gather herbs in the forest and send them to the Jink and his circle, nasty as they were, if he heard that they caught a cold.

But what have they done for you? What exactly have they done for you in return for your love?

Right… he couldn't think of any.

Before his eyes, Administrator's smile readily bent once again and a scene from his past came back to him.

It was the year he turned ten, in the spring… the day he was bestowed his «sacred task» along with a crowd of children by the village chief in the plaza. The sacred task, «Gigas Cedar's Woodcutter», spoken out by Gasupht, the village chief, as he looked down upon the nervous him from the platform, went contrary to his expectations.

But still, there were cries of envy here and there among some of the children. The woodcutter was an honorable sacred task passed down since the Rulid Village was founded and though it wasn't a sword, he would still be presented with a real axe. Even Eugeo himself hadn't felt dissatisfaction over it back then.

Grasping the parchment wrapped with a red ribbon, the proof of his appointment, tightly, Eugeo had ran back to his home on the outskirts of town and announced his sacred task to his family somewhat proudly.

Following a short silence, the first reaction came from the younger one among his brothers. He curtly clicked his tongue and cursed, saying that he thought it would be his last day handling the cleanup for the cows' shit. The older one told his father that it would throw the planting plans for the year into disarray and his father, too, asked Eugeo when his job would end and whether he could help out in the fields then, in a groan. As though afraid of the men's sullenness, his mother disappeared into the kitchen without saying a word.

Eugeo felt constantly ashamed in his home for the next eight years. And despite that, Eugeo's wages as a woodcutter were controlled by his father and before he noticed, the number of goats had multiplied and the farm tools were swapped with new ones. Despite how, Jink, appointed as a guard apprentice, spent all of his wages on himself and ate white bread stuffed full of meat for lunch, and showed off his studded boots and a sword kept in a lustrous sheath. Despite how, Eugeo had to walk on in his worn out shoes and a jute sack filled with nothing more than the left over hard bread on his back before Jink's presence.

"You see? Have any of those you loved done anything for you, even once? On the contrary, they took pleasure in your wretchedness and even sneered at you, haven't they?"

Yes… that was exactly it.

Jink had said this to Eugeo after around two years after that summer of his eleventh year, when Alice was taken away by the integrity knight. There aren't any women left to care for you any longer, with that girl of the village chief gone now, he said.

Jink's eyes back then told him that he deserved it. The fact that Eugeo lost the privilege of being the one closest to the cutest girl in the village and a genius at sacred arts, Alice, brought joy to him.

In the end, not a single person in Rulid returned Eugeo's feelings. Although he had earned the right to gain something equivalent to what he had given, it had been robbed from him without rhyme or reason.

"Then, couldn't you simply return that despair and frustration to them? You wish to, don't you? It would feel so good… imagine becoming an integrity knight and making a triumphant return to your home village atop a silver flying dragon. Imagine having all who have made a fool out of you crawl on the ground and pressing down on their heads with your shiny boots. With that, you could finally take back everything they have stolen from you thus far. And that's not all…"

The beautiful, silver-haired girl slowly, gently let the two arms supporting her breasts fall, as though drawing him in. Those two mounds bounced like ripened fruits upon losing their support.

The highest minister reached her two arms straight towards Eugeo and whispered with while showing an enthralling smile.

"You can enjoy being loved for the first time as much as you want. A real, numbing sense of satisfaction from head to toe. I am different from those who have taken away from you without giving anything in return. If you could give me your love, you will have just as much in return. I will let you experience incomparable pleasure, beyond what you could possibly imagine now, if only you could grant me your deepest love."

Even the final trickle of Eugeo's ability to think was about to be drawn into that devilish flower. But still, a fragment of reason left in the depths of his heart put up a quiet resistance.

—What exactly… is love?

—Is it nothing more than something that could be assigned a value… like money…?

It's not, Eugeo-senpai!

His sight turned towards the voice he heard and saw a red-haired girl clad in a grey uniform, desperately reaching out with her hand in the darkness on the other side.

But before Eugeo's hand could stretch out, the thick, pitch black curtains descended upon the red-haired girl and she vanished, leaving behind only the shade of grief in her eyes.

And this time, a voice from someone else came from the opposite direction.

It's not, Eugeo. Love is definitely not just something to be repaid.

Turning around, he found a small grassy space parting the darkness and a golden-haired girl wearing a blue dress standing in it. The girl's blue eyes dazzlingly glittered as though they were the one and only exit to this bottomless swap and Eugeo roused his weary legs in an attempt to crawl towards her.

However, the black curtains fell down with a thud once more and the verdant field was erased. Eugeo was at a loss with the light's departure and remained crouching where he was. He could hardly bear this searing thirst any longer. Upon recalling the continuous, unjust oppression, exploitation, and thief of what should have belonged to him from his childhood, his anguish and chagrin transformed into concentrated brine, scorching his throat.

At last, Eugeo began to steadily worm himself forth with his head hung down. Towards the flow of nectar emitting a fragrance of cloying sweetness.

Pushing through the smooth silk sheets, his fingertips extended forward and came into contact with refreshingly cool skin. When he brought his face up, the silver-haired girl with looks on par with a goddess showed a transcendental smile as she took Eugeo's hand.

With his right hand gently pulled forward, he pitched forward without resistance. The unclothed body received Eugeo and enveloped him into a mesmerizing softness.

A voice whispered into his ear with sweet breaths.

"You want it, don't you, Eugeo? To forget all of your grief, to indulge in all I have to offer? But no, not yet. I have already said this, first, you will have to give me your love. Now, repeat after me. Trust only in me and offer all you have. Well… first, start a sacred art."

All that Eugeo was aware of now, were the layers of sweet-scented softness wrapping around him.

He faintly heard his own mouth move, spilling out a hoarse voice.

"*System… call.*"

“Yes… go on… «*remove core protection*».”

The highest minister’s voice lightly shook, carrying a certain emotion for the first time.

Eugeo chanted the first word of the unfamiliar art in a mumble.

“*Remove…*”

Entrusting his body with the command he had been given, his existence felt increasingly light and dim. The hunger and thirst that had tormented Eugeo for a long, long time faded into the sweet nectar. At the same time, a precious emotion that he had always held in the core of his heart crumbled, lost its shape, and vanished.

—Is this really for the best…?

The question he asked himself in his diminishing chest lit a humble flame, but the next word spilled from his mouth before he found the answer.

“*Core…*”

—Well, I really don’t want to experience anymore sadness, anymore sorrow.

Love in this world could never be made certain. Even if… even if Alice were to regain her memories, what if she had no eyes for Eugeo? What if Alice ended up filled with fear and loathing for Eugeo, who had offended the Taboo Index by cutting Humbert and turned his sword against many knights in opposition to the Axiom Church…?

If things could end up that way, it might be better to simply stop right here.

Eugeo vaguely understood his journey over these two years would come to a complete halt the moment he chanted the third word. However, he could forget his painful, dismal past by doing so—he could immerse himself in the love granted by this silver-haired girl; that reasoning certainly contributed to his choice as well.

“Yes… now, come to me, Eugeo, come into me.”

A whisper, filled with an unparalleled sweetness, flowed into his ear.

"Welcome, to my eternal stasis…"

A single tear drop flowed as Eugeo murmured that final word.

3

"There… we… goooo!"

With that desperate cry, I pulled my body up for the umpteen time, hooked my right leg onto the marble edge and clambered over it before falling flat down onto the smooth floor.

My joints and muscles, abused beyond their limits, throbbed as though they were sizzling in a fire. Large drops of sweat poured endlessly down my forehead and neck and I could only let out my coarse breathing, not even having enough strength to wipe them away with my fingertips. The realism of this hefty fatigue was practically enough to dispel my belief of the basis that this world was a virtual world generated by the STL.

I had finally reached the ninety-fifth floor of the Central Cathedral at the end of roughly two agonizing hours after awaiting the moon's ascent and resuming the wall climbing, but I no longer had the energy to gaze around. Throwing out my limbs, I closed my eyes and waited for even the slightest amount of my Life to recover.

The objective, the ninety-fifth floor, was merely seven floors from that terrace set up with «minions», but the reason for spending this much time and effort to cross that distance was this golden knight strapped onto my back with thin chains.

Several hours ago, Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty did manage to surpass that which was likely set on everyone in the Underworld, «the seal of the right eye»—that mysterious system alert, by her own will, but the price she paid was heavy indeed.

Her right eye, bearing a resemblance to jasper, blew off without a trace and the pain from that shock rendered Alice unconscious.

I am uncertain if it was due to their souls being stored in an artificial storage medium, the light cube, but those of the Underworld were relatively susceptible to psychological shocks. When afflicted by excessive grief, fear, or perhaps anger and such—those emotions were rare due to the lack of crime in the world, however—they end up losing their sense of reason for a period of time, likely to protect their fluct lights from a fatal error. Like what had occurred to Selka, Alice's little sister, when she was captured by a squad of goblins at the northern mountain range cave two years ago.

I conjectured that Alice, too, had only lost consciousness to mitigate the shock from breaking that seal and would eventually awaken. She should have died on the spot like the head elite swordsman-in-training, Raios Antinous, if her fluct light had threw a fatal error.

On that line of thought, it was a real surprise that Eugeo, having experienced the same phenomenon as Alice in Raios's room two days ago, managed to draw his sword without losing consciousness. As expected, he wasn't in an excellent state of mind after we were thrown into the discipline chamber together, but he could still give a proper reply when spoken to.

I had yet to form a concrete idea on the reasoning behind their emotional vulnerability and their absolute obedience towards orders, but at the very least, it wasn't impossible for the people of the Underworld to transcend those. Eugeo and Alice were tangible proof. The people of the Underworld were intelligence created by man—AI, but the strength of their souls was no different from the humans of the real world…

Thinking through such things, I awaited Alice's recovery on the minions' terrace, but the esteemed knight wouldn't wake up even after an hour had passed. I did stanch the blood flow from her right eye with sacred arts, but I lacked both adequate space resources and the competency as an art user to cure it completely. The moon rose as I stayed on standby and the space resources began to be replenished, but that had to be reserved for creating the pitons necessary for climbing. I tore the hem of my shirt off and made an impromptu bandage, winding it around Alice's face in consolation, before making up my mind to climb the tower with the unconscious integrity knight on my back.

Upon undoing the chain that connected both of our bodies and carrying Alice's slender, yet unbearably heavy body, I seriously considered leaving behind the golden armor and the Fragrant Olive Sword that made up most of the weight. But seeing as Alice was resolved to fight on our side, it would be inane to discard that equipment.

Resigning myself to my fate once again, I firmly fixed the knight I carried in place and began climbing the sheer wall towards my goal, the upper portion of the cathedral that had sank into the night sky. When I saw a new terrace at the end of an excruciating two hours, the strength that escaped me from the relief I felt even caused me to drop a piton. I could only pray that no one was standing on the ground straight below.

Anyway, I ought to be forgiven for lying down for a nap after climbing over ninety meters of this vertical, straight wall to reach the goal, this ninety-fifth floor. Not that I'd move for another three minutes even I weren't.

I gathered my determination to do so and focused my all into relaxing my entire body, sinking into bliss, but a hindrance sprang forth from behind me; it was a soft voice.

"U… uhm…"

The knight's breath tickled my nape as she stirred awake.

"…Where… I'm… how…"

Those murmurs escaped from Alice before she tried to get up, but the chain immediately tensed up and the weight that momentarily left my back returned.

"These chains… Kirito… don't tell me you carried me… all the way here…?

That's right, be a little more grateful about it. That mutter to myself lasted a brief moment.

"Get away from me, you're soaked in sweat! It's seeping into my clothes! Quick, get off me!"

And upon sending a jab to the back of my head alongside that scream, my brow smashed into the marble floor with all of her strength back it.

"You're horrible… that was too much…"

Having undone the chain in a hurry and lowered down the baggage on my back, I leaned against a nearby circular pillar as I sighed.

However, as for the esteemed knight, she took no notice of my hard labor and dusted off her white skirt with a scowl. Just as I thought she was done, wrinkles settled in her brow as she pinched the sleeve that had stayed in constant contact with my neck while I carried her. I couldn't help but to give a light rebuke at least, after seeing such conduct.

"If it's annoying you that much, why don't you just get in a bath or something, oh great knight?"

It was meant as a jab towards Alice's fussiness, but as the recipient began tilted her head in actual consideration, I had to continue on in a fluster.

"No, that's a joke! Let's not even joke about going all the way back down to the floors in the middle."

"No, there's no need to go that far, a mere five floors below… on the ninetieth floor, there is a large bath meant for the integrity knights' use."

"Wha…"

I was the one who trembled this time round. It would be a lie if I said that I didn't want to clean up my clothes and body, smeared with dust and sweat due to the consecutive, fierce battles after escaping the underground jail, along with that unexpected wall climbing.

It didn't have to be a bath, even a single pool of water close by would—I pondered while scanning through our surroundings once again.

The ninety-fifth floor of the cathedral, «(Morning Star Lookout)», appeared to have been built as a humongous viewing deck as its name implied. The circumference of the perfectly rectangular floor had no walls—that was the reason why we set this place as our target, after all—and circular columns supported the ceiling in intervals of roughly three meters all by themselves. I couldn't help but give a nod of agreement to Administrator's decision to station minions on the wall a little below in the slight chance of intruders, after seeing how openly this was constructed.

The outermost circumference, where Alice and I were, was a terrace encircling the floor with short steps stretching inwards from various positions. Several marble sculptures and verdant shrubs were placed in the slightly higher interior, along with tables and chairs of magnificent design. Sitting in those chairs in the afternoon, rather than the middle of the night like now, would likely allow a lovely bird's eye view of the Underworld, extending on infinitely.

The grand staircase leading up and down seemed to have been built on the northern side. Belated as it might be, there were no sign of anyone aside from us on the floor now.

Now then, had Eugeo passed through this ninety-fifth floor yet?

Over seven hours had passed since we were separated on the eightieth floor. Considering it rationally, Eugeo should have reached this place far faster than us who went through great struggles to climb up the outer wall.

But the problem would be the mighty opponent standing in Eugeo's way, stronger than the minions we had fought—Integrity Knight Commander Bercouli Synthesis One himself. The hero of the legend, supposedly stronger than both Deputy Integrity Knight Commander Fanatio who fiercely fought me to a close draw and Alice who dealt with me without difficulty.

Of course, Eugeo wasn't weak. He might have even surpassed me in terms of skill with the sword. However, technique alone could not defeat the upper ranks of the integrity knights who were effectively superhuman. That made striking the opponent unaware and making use of the entire situation necessary, a so-called strategy of «anything goes». Was the diligent Eugeo actually capable of that…?

Having taken a look around as well, Alice called out to me as I worried.

"Of course, this has nothing to do with the bath, but… that partner of yours called Eugeo hasn't gotten this high yet, has he?"

"Eh? Why?"

"After all, this ninety-fifth floor is the one and only place where we could return back into the cathedral after getting thrown outside. That much should be obvious on first sight… in other words, if he had reached here before us, he would have been waiting here for you."

"…I see, that's true…"

I nodded with my arms crossed. Now that she brought it up, if Eugeo had already passed this floor before us, he would have likely been captured—or turned into a corpse. Though it went against my earlier conjecture, I would like to believe that Eugeo wasn't one to be captured or killed that easily.

"Besides, if Eugeo…"

Alice murmured with a pensive expression, with his name rolling off her tongue truly naturally, though the person in question probably hadn't noticed so herself.

"…had climbed the grand staircase beyond the Cloudtop Garden, he would have encountered the strongest opponent before he reached here, the Morning Star Lookout. He would have come into contact with oji-sama… His Excellency, Knight Commander Bercouli."

Putting aside how she called him *oji-sama* for now, I decided to enquire about something that caught my attention.

"So he really is strong? His Excellency, the Knight Commander."

Alice's face promptly turned into a smile with the improvised bandage still wrapped around it as she nodded.

"I, too, have never achieved victory in a match against him. Hence, both you, who lost against me, and Eugeo, possessing as much skill as you, couldn't possibly hope to defeat him."

"…Sure, that stands to reason. But as for whether I would have lost or not had we continued fighting…"

Ignoring my sore grumbling, the golden knight spoke on.

"Certainly, oji-sama's expertise with the sword is beyond top class, but his armament full control art could even be said to be a technique on the level of the gods. The sacred instrument he holds, the «Time Piercing Sword», possesses the power to cleave through time as its name suggests. To be specific, the might behind oji-sama's slashes remain in the air for a period of time… do you understand the implication of that? Even if one were to dodge those slashes one after another, it would only take a mere moment to get imprisoned within a cage of those invisible blades. Their limbs would be severed on touch, perhaps even their necks if they were down on their luck, and that said, they would meet their end even if they stayed still. All who have fought oji-sama had ended up taking on a single fatal hit in the end, like some wooden dummy."

"…The slashes remain…"

It was tough imagining the reality through those words alone, but I suppose that essentially meant that the slashes had their durations stretched into the future. If that was the case, it truly was a frightening ability. It easily nullified the essence of the Aincrad consecutive hits sword skills, which disregarded the power behind each hit in order to lengthen the attacks in terms of distance and time, that Eugeo and I excelled in.

Exactly how did Eugeo fare against such an opponent? Though I am convinced that he had not died, cold, ominous premonitions crept their way up my back.

I guess it really would be best to head downstairs in search of my partner. But what if the worst case had already occurred and he was apprehended and taken away upstairs… to the top of the cathedral, where Administrator lived? What if the highest minister, intimate with every command, was conducting some sort of dangerous art upon him this very moment…?

Putting my strength into my two legs that had finally shook off some of their fatigue, I staggered as I stood up. Glaring at the grand staircase on the northern side of the floor, I chewed my lips.

The thought that this was the perfect time to use sacred arts to search for Eugeo's current position came to me, but as a general rule, sacred arts could not be targeted on «humans not in this area». Administrator and Cardinal's death match would have been settled long ago if that had been possible. Targeting an object instead of a human would still be possible, but…

I finally noticed the existence of a simple solution upon getting to that point in my thoughts and muttered.

"I see… that's right."

After unconcernedly nodding at Alice who turned to me with a suspicious look, I raised my right hand and shouted out at a restrained volume.

"*System call!*"

The space resources drained by the wall climbing had apparently been recovering as my extended fingers faintly glowed violet. Holding back the impulse to rush, I carefully chanted out the length of the command.

"*Generate umbra element. Adhere possession. Object ID, WLSS703. Discharge.*"

That all came from memory. Though it was nothing more than a guess, the string, «WLSS», in the first half of the ID might be short for «Double-edged, Long Sword, Single-hand»* while the numbers in the latter half could be the serial number for swords in that category. My black sword's ID was «WLSS102382», so there might mean that only several hundreds of single-handed longswords existed back when the Blue Rose Sword was generated and that particular number had went beyond a hundred thousand two years ago…

Even as I brooded over such things, an umbra element bead separated from my finger tip as it breezily floated downwards and burst apart, vanishing with a sparkly noise the moment it touched the floor a short distance away.

"…Downstairs, huh."

"It would appear so."

I exchanged a curt conversation with Alice who now had a look of comprehension on.

I gripped and opened my lowered right hand several times; it seems that my Life, reduced from fatigue, had already recovered somewhat, but the injuries Alice had suffered should be far deeper than my own. Taking another look at the knight, I briefly enquired.

"How's your right eye, any chance it could be healed…?"

Alice gently pressed against her right eye, covered by a bandage that was originally my shirt, with her finger tips at that and replied with a question.

"You were the one… who applied this?"

"Yeah… I got the blood to stop somehow, that's the limits of my sacred arts. But you might be…"

"Well, of course, your art usage authority couldn't possibly compare to mine, but…"

Voicing out her usual harsh words without hesitation as usual, she turned her lone left eye towards the skies and stared at the bluish-white full moon.

"The current amount of sacred power in the air isn't sufficient to generate the number of luminous elements necessary to regenerate my lost eye at all. It will likely remain impossible until Solus rises."

“Then, if you convert some sort of high priority *ob*- no, item on you into sacred power… like that armor, perhaps…”

“The art to return equipment into sacred power itself, too, requires no small amount of sacred power. Have you not learnt that in the academy?”

Alice put on a mildly exasperated face before hardening her expression and speaking.

“It still hurts and my right field of vision is slightly deprived, but neither would serve much obstacle in combat. I do not mind staying in this state for the time being.”

“B-But…”

“—And I wish to hold onto this sensation for a little longer. This pain; this proof of my resolve to do battle with the Axiom Church I had trusted in for these many years…”

I could do naught but nod with her saying that. Knight Alice would have to cut open a path to obtain a fate chosen by her own hand in the battles happening from now on.

“…Got it. I’ll have your right if we have to fight.”

Replying thus, I shifted my sight towards the grand staircase.

“Well, sorry to rush you, but let’s get going. Eugeo seems to be quite a few floors below judging from the umbra element earlier.”

To be accurate, I had searched for the Blue Rose Sword’s current position, rather than Eugeo’s, but he wouldn’t let his beloved sword out from his grasp until something major had happened. Upon hearing my words, Alice, too, looked towards the stairs and nodded.

“Allow me to lead the way, I am familiar with the way… though I suppose we are only heading down the stairs.”

Without granting me a chance to slip a word after her proclamation, she began walking with her boots making a clicking sound. I hurriedly followed behind.

Nothing more than a chilly draft blew from the grand staircase heading downwards at the northern end of the floor, the presence of humans was utterly lacking beyond the darkness. Signs of life from the inhabitants of the Central Cathedral was already boundlessly faint even on the lower floors, but this place near the top brimming with viscid dreariness could practically get it classified as a beautiful ruin. One could hardly believe this was the pivotal organization reigning over the whole of the Human World.

If I recall right, the top of the Axiom Church should have a bunch of people called elders, aside from the Integrity Knight Order, but I wonder why haven't we caught sight of any of them even after coming this high.

Positioning myself on Alice's right after she started descending the stairs in advance, I softly voiced my misgiving. The knight quickly frowned when I did and replied in a whisper as well.

"To be perfectly honest… not even us, the integrity knights, have been briefed on the full picture behind the elders. We have heard of a department named the Chamber of Elders on the floors above, from the ninety-sixth, but the knights were barred from entering and…"

"Huh… —In the first place, what do those elders' work involve?"

"……The Taboo Index."

Alice's voice became increasingly grave.

"Confirming and inspecting the Human World's inhabitants' compliance to the Taboo Index… that's the elders' work. And the integrity knights are dispatched to deal with the situation whenever one who breaks a taboo appears. The order for me to head towards the Sword Mastery Academy in North Centoria to arrest Eugeo and you, too, was one from the elders."

"…I see… So, in other words, the Chamber of Elders does the highest minister's work in her place, huh? But it's pretty amazing that cautious Administrator granted them such a high authority. Or maybe the elders have their memories suppressed like the integrity knights as well…"

Alice scowled while shaking her head at my words.

"Please don't mention anything concerning memories. I would be troubled if my left eye started hurting this time round."

"S-Sorry. But I think it's okay now… Nothing really happened to Eugeo after he broke through the seal once too…"

"…I hope so too."

I looked at Alice softly caress the eye patch over where her right eye was while recalling what had happened on the terrace outside.

Despite trembling time after time before she made up her mind to revolt against the church and fight against the highest minister, the «piety module» that should have been inserted into her fluct light through that process hadn't turned unstable in the slightest. I had guessed that the «memory fragment» stolen from Alice by Administrator was of her little sister, Selka, or her childhood friend, Eugeo, but unlike with Eldrie, that purple prism showed no sign of leaving her forehead, both when she met with Eugeo at the Sword Mastery Academy and when she heard Selka's name.

In that case, what exactly are the contents of the memories stolen from Alice and in Administrator's possession?

There wasn't any point in bothering with that now. After all, if we get Cardinal to conduct a so-called «reverse synthesis», Alice would regain her former memories and her integrity knight persona walking at my side right now would vanish…

My feet moved automatically as I became aware of a soft throbbing in my chest. Our footsteps were all that reverberated in the grand staircase, silent as a cemetery, in the middle of the night.

Upon passing a landing covered in red carpeting for the fifth time, the stairs downward cut off and a gigantic door took their place. We did ignore the floors from ninety-fourth to ninety-first, but there weren't any traces of battle left on the floor and walls thus far.

I gave a look that asked, "Here?", to Alice who stopped in her tracks.

"Yes… The ninetieth floor's large bath is just ahead. Oji-sama certainly wouldn't have chosen such a place to intercept him… or so I would think, but that man is simply…"

Gulping down the rest of her words, Alice raised her right hand and placed it against the double doors. The thick marble slab easily turned without making any noise.

White mist surged forth as a whole from inside in that instant and I instinctively averted my face.

"Woah… this is some amazing steam. Just how huge is this bath, I practically can't see anything in front of me."

That wasn't entirely true of course, but it would be so nice to strip my sweat-soaked clothes and jump into the warm water… with those thoughts in my mind, I took a step in. There, I finally noticed the white mist sticking to my whole body wasn't anything like steam rising from hot water, but a cold wave caused by extremely low temperatures.

It appeared this was beyond Alice's expectations as well, seeing as she let out a small sneeze—while I let a huge one rip. I highly doubt it was pushed aside by my breath, but the white veil smoothly diverged left and right. The now-exposed, panoramic view of the large bath struck me into standing still.

It must have used up the entire cathedral floor, with the wall on the other end so far away it appeared white and hazy. The bath took up nearly all of the floor area and was halved by the path stretching straight out from where Alice and I stood, but each of them were a pool with a size of fifty meters, or so they appeared to me.

However, what was truly frightening was how the left side, which should have been brimming with hot water, was now frozen pure white.

Even the water flowing from a spout installed at the corner of the bath, made in the resemblance of a beast's head, had turned into a curved icicle, an indication that it froze over in an instant. This was, of course, no natural phenomenon and should be acknowledged as a result brought about by some large-scale sacred art.

However, it was no simple task to freeze over this quantity of hot water in an instant. If the usual freezing arts done through cryogenic elements were used, it would require ten high ranking users at the very least, wouldn't it?

I went forward towards the left and down the stairs that served as the edge of the bath, then placed my foot upon the white and hardened ice surface. The ice didn't even creak with my entire weight upon it while my black sword was still on me. The depths must have been frozen all the way through to the bottom.

"…Just who and why…"

I muttered, dumbfounded, as I pushed through the lingering mist, my feet taking several steps forward before they treaded onto something hard. A fleeting noise rang out from that before breaking apart in that instant. Frowning and taking a look downwards, I saw that there appeared to be numerous more round lumps scattered on the ice surface. Reaching my hand out, I broke one off and brought it before my face.

It—had several blue, translucent petals in bloom, a rose made from ice.

"……!!"

I had caught sight of this several times before. When I fought against Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio Synthesis Two on the fiftieth floor of the cathedral, «Grand Cloister of Spiritual Light»—or when I fought with Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty on the eightieth floor, «Cloudtop Garden». Eugeo's armament complete control art, used to stop their movement, gave birth to ice flowers like these.

In other words, what froze over the whole of this gigantic bath was not a sacred art, but…

"……Eugeo…"

A chime rang out as Alice came down beside me as I muttered. She murmured hoarsely with her left eye opened wide in shock.

"Goodness… Eugeo was the one who did this…?"

"Yeah, no mistake about that. It's his Blue Rose Sword's armament complete control art. …Honestly, I never imagined it could be this powerful…"

Eugeo mentioned that his armament full control art was meant for restricting movement, but this was ridiculous. A person would have all of his or her Life drained in an instant just by getting caught up in this icy hell.

He might have truly driven away the knight of legend, Bercouli… I pondered while anxiously scanning around. The umbra element searching for the Blue Rose Sword had certainly indicated somewhere around here, thus Eugeo should be near this sword as well.

That then happened. Alice let out a soft "Ah" by my side.

"……!"

I sharply drew in a breath in the next moment. Around twenty meters away, following the knight's sight, was a visibly large silhouette. That was unmistakably the contour of a human's shoulders and head. Someone was buried within the ice.

After exchanging glances with Alice, we both kicked through the ice roses at our feet as we started running. But I immediately realized that the silhouette buried in the ice clearly wasn't Eugeo. Both his shoulder breadth and his neck thickness were several times as burly as Eugeo's.

I slackened my speed from disappointment and wariness, but on the other hand, Alice cried out shrilly and ran even quicker.

"Oji-sama…!"

She rushed over to the frozen silhouette without restrain.

—That's Knight Commander Bercouli!? Then where had Eugeo went…!?

I sped up once again even in my discomposure. By the time I got there several seconds later, Alice was already kneeling before the giant half-buried in ice, her two hands grasped together tightly as she wringed out a half-scream.

"Oji-sama…! Your Excellency, Knight Commander! What had happened that you were…!?"

Shouldn't Alice have already known of the Blue Rose Sword's ability after experiencing Eugeo's armament full control art firsthand on the eightieth-floor? My doubts were cleared immediately.

The large man sunk chest-deep within the thick ice was not merely frozen. His shoulders, bulging with muscles, his neck, thick as a log, and his masculine facial features with the edge of a war sword were all dyed in an inanimated grey.

"…This… isn't Eugeo's armament full control art…"

Still kneeling down, Alice gently nodded when I muttered in a daze.

"…I believe so as well. I have heard about this from oji-sama a long time ago. That the chief elder is granted the authority to turn each and every human to stone… and that includes even the integrity knights. I believe that art was named… «*Deep Freeze*», if I recall right."

"*Deep… freeze.* But why… Shouldn't he be a vital source of combat might for suppressing us intruders right now?"

"…Oji-sama seemed to hold faint distrust against the instructions handed down by the Chamber of Elders… However, he believed peace without the Axiom Church's rule was impossible like I once did and continued fighting through the endless days. Regardless of the authority the chief elder may possess, this… this treatment is definitely unwarranted, whatever the circumstances might have been!!"

Tears overflowing from Alice's left eye trickled to her knees as she cried out with her head hung down. Without even attempting to wipe her cheeks, Alice reached out with both hands and clung to the petrified Bercouli. The drops of tears falling through the air landed onto the knight commander's cheeks and scattered as light particles. That was when it happened.

Bishii! That noise hammered my ears.

Alice sprang to her feet and fixed her eyes upon Bercouli's neck. As though the meager heat from Alice's tears were dissolving through the petrification, thin cracks formed upon him. The cracks instantly multiplied and miniscule fragments burst off.

The ashen stone sculpture crackled on its own and its neck slowly, sluggishly turned as Alice and I looked on in amazement.

Before long, the stone figure, with its head finally turned upwards, started developing cracks near its mouth this time round. Those broken pieces that must have been living flesh and blood a few hours ago continued falling off without stop.

Judging from the name, *deep freeze*, it seemed probable that command completely froze not just the Underworld inhabitants' physical bodies, but their minds as well. It was different from being painted over with plaster in the real world. They would be denied from all possible motions as instructed by their absolute god, the system. And this man was smashing through that with the might of his will.

"Oji-sama… stop, stop it! Your body will shatter, oji-sama!!"

Alice shouted out in a voice streaked with tears. However, Knight Commander Bercouli ceaselessly struggled against god and his eyelids finally lifted up as remarkably loud breaking noises rang out. His eyes were dyed in the same grey as his skin, but his irises quivered like the surface of water and slightly regained a shade of pale, bluish grey. I could vividly feel the strength of will coming from the man's two eyes.

His mouth formed a broad grin as fragments endlessly flaked off him and a terribly hoarse—yet stout voice streamed out from there.

"…Hey, lil' miss. You don't hafta cry that hard… it's ruining your beauty."

"Oji-sama…!!"

"Stop worrying already… It's not like I would kick the bucket from a single art like this, right? Instead…"

Bercouli stopped his words for a moment and stared at Alice's crying face right before him, along with the impromptu bandage covering its right, before showing a fuzzy smile filled with what seemed like a father's love.

"So that's it… lil' miss, you've finally… crossed that wall, huh… The seal I've… spent three hundred years without breaking it… in the right eye…"

"O-Ojisama…… I… I…"

"Don't make… that face… I'm… glad… Now… there's nothing more… I can teach you, lil' miss…"

"That's not… that's not true!! There are still many, many things that I want you to teach me, Oji-sama…!!"

Making no attempt to hold back her childish weeping, Alice hugged the knight commander's neck with both arms once more. A gentle smile still on his face, Bercouli whispered into Alice's ear.

"You can definitely do it, lil' miss… The Axiom Church's mistakes… amend them and guide this… twisted world to how… it should be……"

I realized that voice was rapidly fading away. The astounding willpower brought forth by the knight commander's fluct light was nearly at its end.

Bercouli's eyes, losing their light and returning to rock-grey, suddenly pointed straight towards me. From his unmoving lips, a grave, hoarse voice poured out.

“Hey, rascal… I’ll leave lil’ Alice… in your… hands.”

“…Right.”

I nodded with just that and the hero of olden times nodded back as new cracks were carved into his neck. What would likely be his last words reached my ears on the white, cold air.

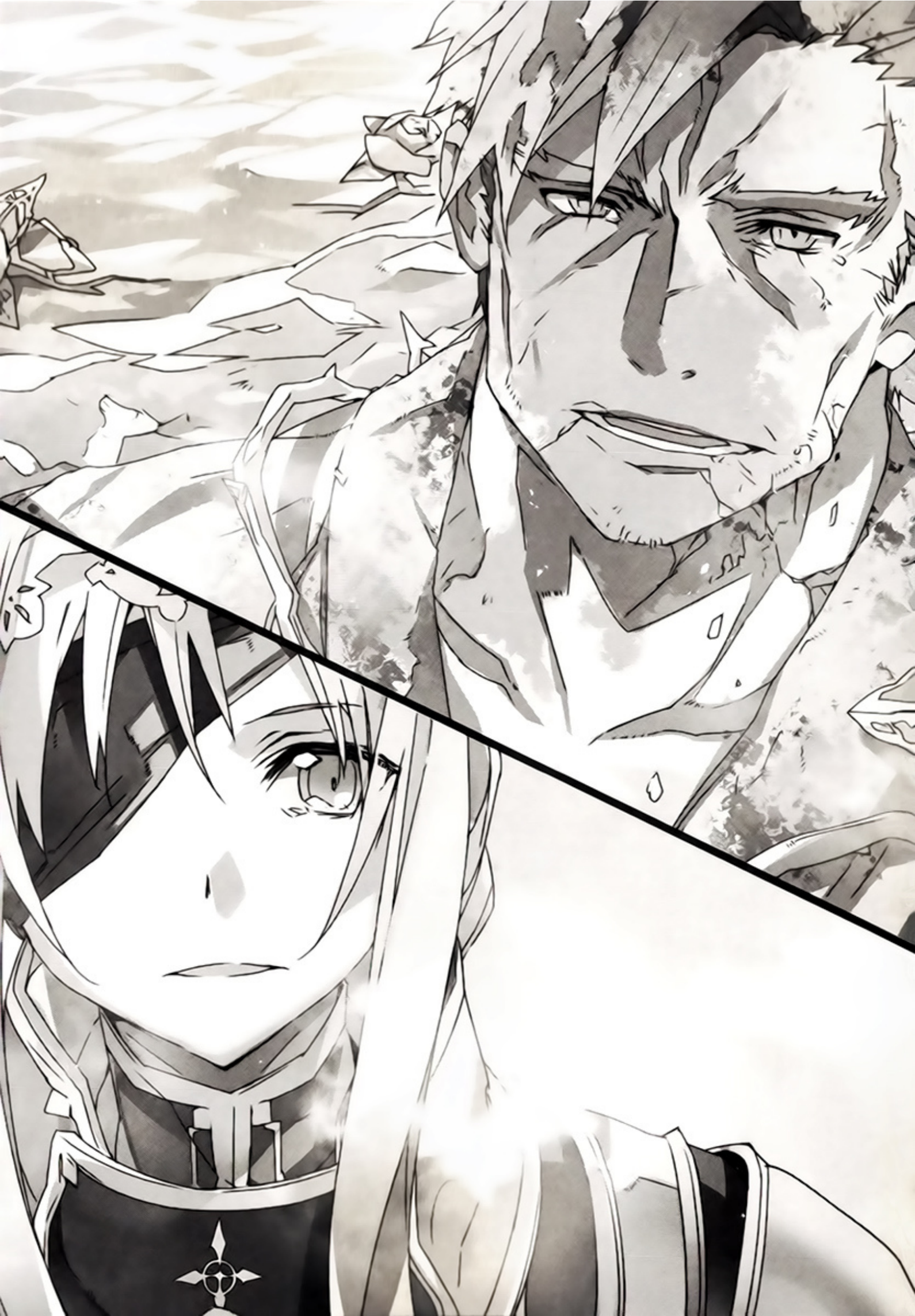
“Your… partner was… taken by… the chief elder, Chudelkin… Probably… to the highest minister’s room… Hurry… before that kid’s misled… by his muddle of memories…”

Knight Commander Bercouli turned into a mute stone statue once more the instant his voice was cut off.

With a dense, white mist covering up to his chest, the countless cracks carved upon from his neck to his eyes seemed to further emphasize his valor, fitting of a hero of old.

“……Oji-sama…”

The heartrending voice Alice forced out while clinging to the knight commander’s shoulders reached my ears as I thought hard over the meaning behind the words he left.



The person known as Chief Elder Chudelkin had performed the «*Deep Freeze*» command upon Knight Commander Bercouli and took Eugeo away from this place. Those would be the facts. Taking a look around, I noticed a perfectly square hole in the ice that seemed as though it was cut out by a power saw, down to the bottom of the bath, a short distance away from Bercouli froze.

Eugeo must have definitely activated his ice roses art with the resolution to bring it into a stalemate. And the chief elder who barged in had cut Eugeo out with the ice, then took him up towards Administrator's room. However, those words the knight commander left behind bothered me, about some muddle of memories. I'm not one to believe that Eugeo would yield to brainwashing that easily with what I knew about him, but I couldn't even begin to imagine what trickery Administrator could resort to, with her ability to alter fluct lights directly.

Staring at the shaft as I pondered, I noticed something glittering as it caught the light deep within the smoothly carved out portion. Stepping up towards the hole, I stared hard into it and saw a single long sword stabbed into the bath's base. I couldn't possible mistake its elegant shape even through those few centimeters of ice. It was Eugeo's beloved sword, the Blue Rose Sword.

My unease heightened all the more upon seeing that beautiful sacred instrument that could practically be called part of Eugeo's self left alone at the bottom of the ice. I took a glance at Alice still clinging onto Bercouli, then drew my black sword from the left of my waist and lightly stuck its point straight down, right above the Blue Rose Sword buried in ice. I put strength into the handle I held with an underhand grip for an instant.

Pikii! That loud noise rang out as the ice was smashed vertically down, crumbling into the shaft at its side. Kneeling down on the ice, I covered the mostly exposed Blue Rose Sword's handle with my left hand and slowly pulled on it despite needing to endure its relentless chill, of some negative Celcius degree, stabbing into my skin. The sword put up a little resistance, but was soon drawn out without any noise as miniscule shards of ice fell off it.

When I stood up with the black sword in my right hand and the Blue Rose Sword in my left, various joints of mine creaked in protest at their weight. It was only natural, holding onto two sacred instruments with high priorities, but I couldn't simply give up here. After all, our valet trainees, Ronye and Tieze, had bloodied their hands to bring these swords to us while we were being taken away to the cathedral.

I'm the one in charge of getting this Blue Rose Sword to Eugeo this time.

Taking yet another look around me, I saw a familiar white leather sheath left on the frosty ice surface. Putting the black sword back to the left of my waist, I picked up that fallen sheath and stored the Blue Rose Sword into it. After a bit of thought, I hung the second sword on the right side of my belt, somehow attaining the balance to move around.

I took a deep breath as I turned around and found Alice standing before me, apparently gotten there without my notice. She wiped away the tears from her left eye with her sleeve and spoke in a slightly blunt tone, perhaps to hide her embarrassment.

"…The only ones who would hold two swords are those eccentric upper class nobles capable only of grandstanding… but it fits you well enough, strangely."

"Hm? Oh really…"

I couldn't help but give a wry smile. Certainly, I lived on as a solo player fighting with two swords equipped in my SAO days, but maybe due to the long while I spent hiding my skills, having someone look at me with dual blades brought a sense of unease.

No—that might not be all to it; I might be holding some fear for that grandiose other existence of mine, that Kirito who cleared the death game SAO with dual blades, somewhere in my heart… or perhaps repugnance. No matter how anyone would try to convince me, I would gladly pass on taking up that role for a second time.

"…Even so, swinging two swords at the same time would be simply impossible."

Alice candidly nodded in agreement when I said so while shrugging my shoulders.

"Wielding two swords would render you unable to use the important secret skills, after all. Even if we ignored that fact, there is clearly no benefit in equipping two swords. In any case… if that sword was left behind, I suppose Eugeo must have already been taken away to the esteemed highest minister… It would serve us best to hurry, that person's actions are beyond what human could think up of…"

"…Have you talked to her before? Have you talked to Administrator?"

"Only once."

Alice's facial expression went rigid as she nodded at my question.

“That would be six years ago now… but when I woke up with all of my past memories lost as an integrity knight apprentice, I met the esteemed highest minister, «the one who summoned me» and the mouthpiece of the gods in the Human World. She was a slender and beautiful person who appeared to have never held anything of considerable weight, let alone swords… but her eyes…”

She continued murmuring while hugging herself with her two arms.

“Those silver eyes were like mirrors, reflecting all light… Yes, I understand now. I must have been stricken with dread. What drove me to never go against her, to trust in all of her words, and to give all of myself to her was an overwhelming sense of fear… I am sure of that now.”

“Alice…”

Feeling slight unease, I stared at the knight’s crestfallen face.

However, as though she had read my mind, Alice took in a deep breath, then raised her line of vision and nodded.

“I am fine. I have already decided. To do what I believe to be right, for my little sister living in the faraway north… the family I have never met, as well as the general populace. —Oji-sama knew of the seal placed on our right eyes. In other words, the one who managed the integrity knights, Bercouli Synthesis One, had definitely not blindly believed the Axiom Church’s rule to be benevolent. Coming down to this floor hadn’t been any help in regards to saving your partner, but I am glad I could meet with oji-sama… I will not let my heart waver any longer.”

Alice lowered her waist and gently stroked the petrified Bercouli’s cheeks. But that only lasted a brief moment and she turned back, firmly stepping on the ice as she began walking back towards where we came from.

“Now, let’s hurry. The chief elder might stand in our way before we can face off the esteemed highest minister.”

“H… hey, is it okay leaving the knight commander like that?”

I asked after getting beside her in a half-run and Integrity Knight Alice casually spoke with a keen light in her left eye.

“That would be settled if we string up the chief elder, Chudelkin, and get him to release the art… or perhaps if we cut him down.”

The thought that I definitely didn't want this knight back as my enemy crossed my mind as I walked on, enduring the weight of the two swords.

Alice and I stopped upon returning to the ninety-fifth floor, «Morning Star Lookout», after running through another five floors worth of stairs, though against gravity this time round.

Unlike me, breathing hard due to the Blue Rose Sword hanging off the right of my waist, the great integrity knight had that unchanging tranquil expression on despite how there shouldn't be much difference between the weight of our equipment. I could practically feel a chill from her snow white skin and blue eye, filled with resolute determination, as she looked up towards the stairs continuing to the next floor.

"…Listen to me while you catch your breath. The elders shouldn't be much different from the common folk in terms of close-range combat with weapons, but their sacred arts usage authority exceeds even ours, the integrity knights'. Even if the air barely has any sacred power like now, they would likely use catalyst crystals gathered from the rose garden and launch an unending barrage of long-range arts at us."

"For opponents like that… bringing it into close-range, with a sneak attack, would be the norm… huh.

Alice curtly nodded at me when I cut into the conversation while puffing and panting.

"This is no time to worry about how we fight. It will be best if we managed to approach without their notice, but there is no guarantee we could. If we were to fail in our surprise attack, I'll have you charge in while I guard against their sacred arts with my sword's full control art."

"…So I'm the one attacking, huh…"

With me showing a depressed look at the prospect of fighting against the magic-type enemies that I disliked, Alice's left eyebrow jerked up and she let loose with that usual sarcasm she had a gift for.

"I won't mind reversing the roles. But in that case, I'll have to ask you to defend against those sacred arts."

"Yeah, got it, I'll do it."

Certainly, my black sword was currently recovering its Life and I wasn't sure if it could even use its full control art. If possible, I would honestly like to preserve it until the battle against the highest minister. In the first place, my special skill, summoning that huge, umbra-elemental spear that originated from the Gigas Cedar, was lacking in type of functionality the «flower storm» from Alice's sword had, even if it might have the destructive might to turn a situation around.

Alice solemnly spoke as I nodded away.

"I might cast a healing art from the back if I get in the mood. Go berserk all you like, but leave the chief elder, Chudelkin, alive. If he is as I recall, he should be a small man dressed in a jester costume in shades of vivid blue and red."

"…That's one… outfit that throws all sense of dignity to the wind."

"That may be so, but don't make light of him. Aside from that terrible «*Deep Freeze*» art, he should have many quick and powerful arts under his control… he does have the most capability in the arts in the church, behind the highest minister, after all."

"Yeah, I know. Those who look like runts at first glance always turn out to be the most troublesome in *quests*."

Alice spared only a brief moment to make a wary expression at my words before she turned her pointed gaze towards the ascending stairs and spoke out a "well, then" with strength.

"—Let's get going."

What awaited us, upon running up a floor on the grand staircase, silencing our footsteps as much as we could in our hurry, was a particularly narrow, dimly-lit passage and a black door that shut off the rest of it.

The breadth of the passage illuminated by an eerie green lamp was a meter and a half at most. Narrow enough that two would have to take care when passing by each other. The single door further in, too, was small. Alice and I were barely able to pass through without hitting our heads against it, but well-built men the likes of Knight Commander Bercouli would have to bend over quite a bit, wouldn't they?

This sight simply didn’t feel right. Normally, the stronghold of the strongest enemy—the «last dungeon» in short, would get increasingly extravagant and gaudy in layout and furnishing the further one explored, wouldn’t it? The floors really had been generous with their decorations and floor area usage up until the «Morning Star Lookout» just a floor below.

So what was with this cramp space after we had gotten a hair’s breadth away from the highest floor?

“…This is the «Chamber of Elders» that you mentioned earlier… right?”

“I do believe so, but… —We will know after entering.”

She stepped into the passage, her golden hair aflutter, as though to shrug away her doubts.

Having begun to think that there might be traps set in this narrow space, I instinctively tried to pull her back, but immediately reconsidered and ran after her. They couldn’t possibly have set traps in anticipation of intruders in an area this far inside the Axiom Church. Even if there were any, they would probably be proudly displayed like the minions lining the outer wall.

The narrow path of roughly twenty meters let its intruders pass without incident and we reached the small door.

Exchanging glances, we both nodded before I, in the offensive role, reached out and held the doorknob, which was small as well, with my right hand. The door was unlocked; the knob turned far too easily with a click and it smoothly opened when pulled.

I could distinctly feel a sort of presence in the chilly air blew out from the dim interior—to use an analogy, it was like that desolation I felt whenever I opened the boss rooms’ doors in Aincrad’s labyrinths, inducing goose bumps over my back.

That said, I couldn’t very well tell Alice to swap in as the vanguard now. Firmly pulling open the door, I stooped slightly as I looked in.

The narrow path continued a little more and expanded into a barely illuminated, dark space. A faint violet light seemed to be flickering away, but I couldn’t see where it came from.

It was in that moment I timidly passed through the door that what sounded like grouchy curses reached my eyes. Stopping in my steps, I pricked up my ears. It wasn't a single person's voice. There were several—perhaps even several tens of people muttering over each other. Alice whispered, "Those are sacred arts", from behind and I replied in agreement, holding my breath.

I braced myself, expecting multiple attacks aimed at us, but that was apparently not the case. The word, «*generate*», crucial for offensive arts line, was absent from the fragments of commands I could hear.

I inclined my head, pondering what sort of art it could be, and Alice urged me on with whispers.

"Let us rush in. If the elders are casting some great art unrelated to us, that would actually be in our favor. We might even be able to get within sword fighting range if we slip among their voices in this darkness."

"…Yeah, that's right. Like we planned, I'll be the first to go. My back's yours."

Whispering back, I slowly drew my black sword from the left of my waist. I did think that the Blue Rose Sword at the right of my waist might become a burden in combat, but that wasn't enough to make me leave it in a place like this. Confirming that Alice had drawn her Fragrant Olive Sword, I stepped forth once more.

Upon closing in to the shadowy space, I noticed a sort of unpleasant stench mixed into the cold air. It was unlike the stench of beasts or blood, similar to rotting food. Shrugging my thoughts off that, I pressed my back against the passage's wall while peeking into the dim area known as the «Chamber of Elders».

It was spacious—or rather, it was tall.

The floor was circular with a diameter of roughly twenty meters. The winding wall stretched up high, probably three floors worth of the cathedral, the ceiling sinking into the darkness. In terms of its structure, it bore a slight resemblance to the Great Library Room Cardinal lived in.

There weren't any sort of lamps; the only sources of light were several blinking, faint, violet lights around the walls. Aside from that, there were round objects arranged uniformly with the same short gaps, but I couldn't recognize them.

A new light then came to life rather close to us. A rectangular plane shimmering pale purple—a «Stacia Window». And those spheres further in were……

The heads of humans.

So that meant every one of those round things lined up in this cylindrical hall—

"…De-Decapitated heads…?"

A hoarse voice escaped me and Alice, behind me, let out a whisper at the lowest possible volume from my left.

"No, they seem to be attached to bodies, but… they appear to be growing from the wall…"

I desperately focused my eyes at her words. Certainly, a neck and shoulders were below those round heads, but those were all I could see. After all, their bodies were cleanly withdrawn in the rectangular boxes mounted on the wall.

Judging from the modest sizes of the boxes, their limbs must have been folded as far as they could be bent inside. I could hardly think that environment was pleasant, but the boxed humans seemed entirely unconscious of the situation they were in. After all, their faces thrust out from the boxes completely lacked any sort of emotion.

They grew no hair, not on their head, their face, lacking even eyebrows; the two glassy eyeballs sunk in their pallid faces gazed upon the Stacia Window floating right before them in a daze. The windows displayed flowing lines of text in a minute font and at each pause, the boxed humans voiced out monotonously from their colorless lips.

"*System call… display rebelling index…*"

My whole body stiffened the moment I heard that voice unfitting for one among the living.

"They… they are… from back then…!?"

"Do you know of them!?"

Alice rapidly responded to my groan. Taking glances at the knight's face, I faintly nodded.

"Yeah… Two days ago, right after we fought against Raios and Humbert at the Sword Mastery Academy, something like a window appeared in a corner of the room. The white face that looked at Eugeo and I from in there… was definitely those guys…"

Alice pricked her ears towards the boxed humans' voices once again at my words, then spoke with a scowl.

"The art they're chanting… I have no memory of it whatsoever, but they seem to be dividing the Human World into small divisions and displaying some sort of value. I don't know what that value represents, though."

"A value…"

The moment I parroted those words, a voice flashed back in my mind.

—And within those hidden parameters, there exists one called «Transgression Quotient».

—Administrator quickly noticed this transgression quotient parameter could be used to reveal the humans skeptical of the Taboo Index she established….

The young sage in the Great Library Room, Cardinal, was the one who told me that. There was no more room for doubts. The sacred words, «*Rebelling Index*», voiced out by those boxed humans must be the transgression quotient* Cardinal spoke of, which in other words, meant that the tens of boxed humans in this space were currently checking through the transgression quotients of every single person living in the Human World.

If they were to detect an abnormal value, the boxed humans would peek into that location, identify the one who committed the taboo, and report it. The person who received the report would then instruct the integrity knights to arrest the criminal. This was how Eugeo and I, and Alice as well, were taken away to the cathedral…

I was standing still in mute surprise when a buzzer-like beeping suddenly rang out. Alice and I both instinctively steeled our grips on our swords, but apparently, we hadn't been discovered. After all, the boxed humans who stopped chanting those commands en masse, were looking straight up, rather than down.

I hadn’t noticed until now, but something resembling a faucet stuck up straight above their heads. The boxed humans all opened their mouths and a gooey, brown fluid suddenly flowed out from the faucets. They caught that with their mouths and drank it down mechanically. Some of the fluid spilled from their mouths, staining their necks and chests. That was likely where the stench of rot came from.

The buzzer rang again before long and the supply of liquid food ceased. The boxed humans rotated their head back forward and resumed chanting the commands. *System call… system call…*

—This couldn’t be considered any way to treat humans any longer.

No, I couldn’t permit such terrible treatment, even towards cows and sheep.

I grinded my teeth, holding back the indignation welling from deep inside, just as Alice uttered out in a deep, tense voice.

“And these… are supposed to be the elders, of the Axiom Church, governing the Human World?”

I shifted my vision and saw the integrity knight glaring into the space, her single, blue eye ablaze with light. It didn’t come to mind until she mentioned it, but that certainly would be the conclusion. These tens of boxed humans were the elders, the higher civil servants of the Axiom Church.

“And the one who brought forth such a sight, too… was the highest minister, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah… that’s likely.”

I nodded slightly at Alice’s words.

“They must have been humans excelling at the sacred arts, though with poor combat potential, kidnapped from all over the Human World who had their emotions and thoughts sealed away and reformed into these observation instruments called elders…”

Yes, they were nothing more than mere instruments here. Instruments to overlook the maintenance of the flawless peace… or perhaps, stasis, of the entire Human World under the reign of the Axiom Church. The wretchedness of these elders’ fates eclipsed even the that of the integrity knights who lost the memories of those precious to them. Administrator’s rule had continued on for several hundreds of years on the backs of these victims.

Alice's face slowly slipped down and her lightly fallen golden hair hid her expression.

"…I can't forgive her."

Perhaps projecting its master's rage, the Fragrant Olive Sword gripped in her right hand let out a soft chime.

"No matter what crime they had committed, were they not still given life as humans? To… deprive them of human intelligence and emotion, not stopping at simply robbing them of their memories like the knights were, and shutting them away in small boxes with meals inferior to even that of beasts… there is neither honor nor justice in this place."

Alice boldly raised her face the moment her words ended and she stepped into the hall without faltering. I chased after her in panic.

The elders' vision stayed firmly on the Stacia Windows despite the arrival of this female knight, glittering beautifully even in the depths of darkness. Alice moved to the left and stood before a single box. I stared at the elder's pallid face from diagonally behind.

I couldn't tell its age, or even its gender from up close. Were its human characteristics robbed from their essence in the endless months and years since getting bound in this lightless hall, no, prison?

Alice then smoothly brought the Fragrant Olive Sword in her right hand up. I thought she intented to break the box, but its golden edge was neatly placed where the elder's heart should be. Swallowing my breath, I sounded out a short whisper.

"Alice…!"

"Do you not believe that severing its life… would be an act of mercy?"

I had no immediate answer for that question.

From the circumstances, even if they were to reunite with their «memory fragment»—if there was even one preserved—they might not return to how they were… the elders' fluct lights were broken beyond salvage, rendering repair impossible; I couldn't help but to think that.

However, Cardinal, or maybe Administrator could still grant them a hope that was an improvement over death at the very least. With that in my mind, I thought to place my hand on Alice's golden epaulet to restrain her.

However, a queer noise reverberated through the hall a moment sooner and frozen both Alice and I in our tracks.

"Aah… aah—!"

It was a person's screeching, shrill cry.

"Aah, no way, aah, that is such a waste, oh, highest minister, aah, you mustn't, aah, ooh—!!"

Alice and I exchanged expressions of doubt at that list of senseless interjections.

I have no memory of that tone of voice. It didn't seem to be from someone young, but still, I doubt it was from someone elderly. All I could be sure of, was that the owner of that voice was so excited that he or she had lost all sense of reason.

As though cold water had been thrown on her fury, Alice withdrew her blade and stared towards where the voice came from. I, too, turned my sight in that direction.

Further into the cylindrical hall was a widely opened passage like the one we entered from. The shrill voice carried out from inside intermittently.

"……"

Let's go; Alice seemed to imply as she pointed towards the passage with her sword. Replying with a nod, we began moving with our footsteps silenced.

The hall lacked any pillars or furnishing that we could hide ourselves behind and it took a little courage to cross straight through the middle of the floor, but the tens of humans stationed on the walls had no eyes for us which implied that the liquid food coming out from the faucets were all that existed in their worlds. I couldn't help but pity the underground jailer or the girl in charge of the elevator when I found out about their circumstances, but saying that the elders were tragic was an outright understatement.

At the same time, I could only say that I could make no sense of that person letting out that loud, writhing voice so close to this horrifying place. At the very least, I was sure it couldn't be an ally.

Alice apparently thought the same as a pronounced shade of anger different from earlier appeared on her pale profile. Cutting a straight line through the hall with her footsteps suppressed, Alice peeked in from the entrance to the inner passage. I, too, examined the state of affairs from right behind her.

Beyond the passage, just as strangely narrow as its entrance, was a sizable room, though smaller than the hall. Though modest, it was illuminated, allowing us to see the interior without trouble.

My first impression was that of a extremely bizarre room.

Every single piece of furniture glittered with a crass golden color. From the large ones, like the drawers and bed, to the small, round table and storage boxes; they all gleamed dazzlingly as they reflected the lighting, stabbing into my eyes even from this distance.

And what jutted out from those golden furniture or laid atop them, were countless toys of various types, both big and small.

Most were stuffed toys in loud primary colors. From human dolls, with buttons for eyes and yarn for hair, to animals like dogs and cats, horses and cattle, even some monsters I couldn't identify, in their repulsive forms; they were here, there, and everywhere on the floor and bed, piled up into heaps. There were also building bricks, wooden horses, musical instruments, and such aside from those, as if the toy shop from Centoria's fifth district had been carted here.

And the owner of that voice sat half-buried in there, back facing us.

"Hoooooh!! Hooooooooh!!"

Similarly, the being that had degenerated into hurling out meaningless exclamations, one after another, could be described only as bizarre.

Round. A round head rode atop a nearly spherical torso just like a snowman. But it wasn't white; it was clad in a jester outfit, colored red on the right and blue on the left. The sleeves covering its stumpy arms had vertical stripes of red and blue as well; a sight that seemed like it would hurt if stared at too hard.

The round head was pure white and utterly bald like the elders behind, but unlike them, its surface was glossy with grease. A hat in the same boorish shade of gold as the furniture sat on that head.

I put my mouth closer to Alice's ear as she stood in front and asked as softly as I could.

“That’s the chief elder…?”

“Yes, that’s Chudelkin.”

The knight’s answer was extremely soft as well, but it came out with undeniable disgust. I gazed once more at that back covered by the jester costume.

If he was the chief elder, he should be on equal footing as Knight Commander Bercouli as the highest ranking sacred arts user, one among the Axiom Church’s most important people. But despite that, the word, “defenseless”, was practically written on his back. His mind appeared to be completely taken in by something he carried in his two hands.

I couldn’t see it well due to his round back blocking, but it seemed that thing Chudelkin was absorbed in looking into was a large glass ball. His outstretched, short legs wiggled each time colors flickered within it, along with his exclamations of “hah” or “hoh”.

I figured for sure there would be a tense introduction before a great battle began, like the fights against Deusolbert and Fanatio, but just how should I deal with this situation? When I struggled to think up of a follow-up, Alice suddenly made her move, apparently unable to hold herself back any longer. With a wholehearted dash and no attempt to hide her footsteps, to boot.

That said, she only really needed to kick off the ground five times. Easily leaving me behind as I frantically tried to catch up to the golden squall that raided the room, Alice had already gotten a tight grip on the fluttering collar of Chudelkin’s jester outfit and lifted him up by the time his round neck thought to turn around.

“Hoooooaah!?”

Alice vigorously pulled that round thing, from which a hysterical voice escaped, out from the sea of stuffed toys and lifted him up high. Finally caught up there, I first scanned through the entire room. Of course, I was looking for Eugeo who had been taken away from the large bathe by Chudelkin, but I couldn’t spot him anywhere. When I looked towards the middle of the room again in dejection, the glass ball Chudelkin had been absorbed in caught my eye.

A swirl of light dyed the insides of the glass ball, probably measuring fifty centimeters from side-to-side at least, showing an image with depth. A slovenly sitting girl with both legs folded to the side atop luxurious sheets. Her face was hidden from view by long silver hair, but her body was completely unclothed.

It was when my gusto drained away upon realizing this was the reason behind Chudelkin's odd squeals that I noticed what appeared like another person in front of the sitting. I leaned my face in for a closer look, but perhaps because the art was interrupted off then, the image flashed white and faded.

Alice, on the other hand, showed no interest in the image from the very beginning, thrusting the tip of her sword straight towards the suspended jester's mouth as she spoke.

"I'll slice your tongue off from its base the instant it tries to start the chant for an art."

The small man's mouth that was about to scream something aptly closed after that cold-hearted warning.

Going by the fundamental rule of the Underworld, where all sacred arts need to be preceded by a «*System Call*», an art user opponent would have already lost any advantage upon being forced into such a posture. But still, I kept my attention on those two short arms while I gazed at the face of this man—Chief Elder Chudelkin.

Inexplicable; there weren't many others whose appearance suited that figure of speech. Bright red lips occupied the bottom half of his perfectly circular face, a pug nose protruded above that, and his eyes and eyebrows drew an arc that resembled a smiley.

However, those narrow eyes were now opened as wide as they managed, their small, black pupils quivering as they stared at Alice.

Those thick lips pursed like a trumpet before long and a voice like the creaking of rusted metal leaked out from Chudelkin.

"You… number thirty… why are you in a place like thiss? You should've fallen out of the tower to your death with one of the traitorss."

"Don't call me by a number! My name is Alice. And I've no longer a *thirty*."

Chudelkin's greasy face convulsed at Alice's reply that had been tinged with a biting cold and he turned his eyes towards me for the first time. His two crescent eyes opened into half-moons and heavy breaths spilled out from his throat.

"Y-Youu, why, how!? Thir… Knight Alice, why do you not cut down this rascal heree!? He is a rebel against the church… have I not told you that he was a pawn of the Dark Territoryy!!"

“Certainly, he is a traitor. But he is no vanguard for the land of darkness. Just like I am now.”

“Wh… Wha…”

Chudelkin’s short limbs flapped about as though they were one of the toys the room was filled with.

“S-Soo you plan to betray the church, huuuh, you shitty excuse for a knightttttt!!”

Perhaps the held sword no longer registered in his vision, but Chudelkin’s pure white face was dyed bright red in an instant and his roars of anger reverberated around the room in a voice even more screechy than his usual.

“You useless integrity knights are always like thiss!! And you’re mere puppetss!! Just dolls that have to move according to my commandsss!! How could you do this to Her Eminencee!! How could you betray the highest minister, Administratorrr!!”

Having avoided the saliva scattering from Chudelkin’s mouth by averting her face, Alice coldly replied without even twitching her eyebrows at the scorn.

“Was it not the Axiom Church who had turned us into dolls? After all, you have sealed our memories through the «Synthesis Ritual», forcibly instilled loyalty inside us, and made us believe in the deception that we are knights summoned from the Celestial World.”

“Wha……”

Chudelkin’s face changed, once again, from red to white and his large mouth flapped.

“Why do you know about…”

“It seems we do have some memories left behind despite the sealing, faint as they may be. I saw this scene for a moment when I stepped into the adjacent Chamber of Elders… a frightened girl, filled with anxiety and fear and bound in the middle of that hall, who had the walls to her heart wrenched open by the elders’ many, many arts over a course of three days and three nights. That is the truth behind the Synthesis Ritual… My tears of grief and despair must have once stained the stone floor in that hall when I was still that little girl.”

Despite Alice's attempt at controlling herself, Chudelkin's face bewilderingly swapped between red and white as he heard her words that possessed an edge as sharp as a steel blade.

But in the end, Chudelkin, probably the only human who still retained his own sense of self among the Chamber of Elders, showed a vulgar, defiant grin.

"Yes… it is just as you've saidd. I can still recall it like it just happened yesterday, you knoww? The young, untainted, and oh-so-lovely you, your tears trickling down as you kept on begging and begging… 'Please, don't make me forget… don't make me forget about those precious to me…', hohoho."

Looking at Chudelkin imitating a girl's tone of voice in a repulsive falsetto, Alice's eye carried a glow reminiscent of a fervid flame. But Chudelkin continued with his provocations, resuming his tasteless monologue.

"Oho, ohoo, of course I remember it! The pleasure I get from using that sight can still last me an entire night even now! After brought here from some shitty place in the sticks, you were first raised as a sister apprentice for two years. You were such a tomboy, finding a loophole in the daily regimen and sightseeing at Centoria's midsummer festival, but still, you put your all into studying, believing that you would be able to return back to your hometown one day if you worked hard enoughh. But you see, that was all nonsense! Right after your sacred arts usage authority got fattened up enough, the forced synthesis came! That tear-stained face you had when you found out you would never return home was justt… I even thought about turning you to stone like that, so that I could leave you in my room as a decoration forever and everr! Hoh, hoh, hoh!!"

I couldn't stop my right arm, holding onto my sword, from quivering either upon hearing Chudelkin's utterly vicious spiel. The grinding of Alice's clenched teeth rang out again, but she questioned the chief elder without losing her self-control.

"There was something strange in what you've just said. Forced synthesis, was it? Wouldn't that imply there were some who went through the Synthesis Ritual on their own free will?"

The chief elder narrowed his two eyes to lines at that and briefly laughed.

"Ho-ho, what good ears you have. There are, you know? Six years ago, you refused to chant that secret art needed for the usual synthesis so stubbornlyy. 'My sacred task is still in my real village, I have no need to listen to your orders!' and the like; and you said it with such contemptt!"

It seemed exactly like what Alice would say as a child—I utterly agreed though I didn't know the girl back then at all. Perhaps remembering that as well, the chief elder spat out with his lips curled in annoyance.

"You were such a shitty, impertinent brat back thenn. I even thought about asking Her Eminence, the highest minister, to awakenn, but I couldn't very well do that before finishing the preparations for the ritual, you seee. Thus, I had no choice at all, but to withdraw the automated elders from their duties for the time being to yank open those walls that protected all of those that were oh-so-very precious to youu. Well, I did get my fill of amusement thanks to that show you put up, thoughh! Hohii, hoh-ho—!"

His shrill guffaws ceased the moment the Fragrant Olive Sword's tip got within a centimeter close. However, a grin remained in his eyes and lips.

The glib words spilling from Chudelkin included several valuable pieces of information. I did want to hear his answers on various issues if only Alice could restrain herself, but still, this felt off. Why had this jester been talking about the secrets so vital to the church without restraint? He should have cut down on provocations towards Alice if he wanted his life spared and it didn't seem like he was waiting for a chance to counterattack either.

I gathered my thoughts in silence; as though I didn't register in his eyes at all, Chudelkin resumed his reminiscing.

"The first phase of the forced synthesis ended and you were carried to Her Eminence, the highest minister, by no other by me, as I will proudly admitt. Regrettably, I couldn't watch what happened nextt, but in the end, the ritual completed and you awoke as an integrity knight, convinced that you were a herald of the gods, sent down from the Celestial World, you knoww? Just like every single one of the other knightss. I almost tore open my stomach, laughing when I heard you silly knights go on and on about the Celestial World…"

I noticed Chudelkin's eyes swaying as he quickly spoke without stop, suspended in the air. As though he was waiting for something. In other words, this guy's long story was just to buy time by binding us in this room…?

I tried to call out to Alice to tell her so, but the knight opened her mouth a moment earlier. Her voice, colder than the cold air filling that large bath, streamed into the gilded room.

“Chief Elder Chudelkin, I thought you might have been a poor jester who had his life toyed with by the highest minister, Administrator; a victim like the integrity knights. But even if that was true, it appears you had your fill of fun from your own circumstances. I suppose you have no lingering regrets, then. These stories are starting to bore me.”

The tip of the Fragrant Olive Sword shifted and pressed against the middle of the round, bulging jester costume—right on the heart. The glittering material showed some final resistance as it slightly sank in.

Chudelkin should reveal some new information now if his aim was to buy time. Perhaps even Eugeo’s location.

My predictions were easily betrayed a second later.

The golden blade dug deep into the chief elder’s chest as he stayed silent, his mouth left open in the midst of his words. His narrow eyes opened wide and his jester costume of red and blue strained as it swelled. Perhaps to avoid the spurting blood, Alice swung her face away; it then happened.

Baan! That tremendous explosive noise roared out and Chudelkin’s perfectly round body shot off like a balloon. A flood of blood dyed Alice’s armor crimson—not.

“What…”

“Eh…!?”

Both Alice and I let out cries of surprise. What spurted out wasn’t liquid but gas—fumes colored bright red. It soon spread into the surroundings, shrouding the entire room of toys.

There were monsters with this special ability in Aincrad too. Their skin swelled over their whole bodies and whenever they were hit by anything aside from a blunt-type attack, they would burst open and spew out a lot of smoke, their real selves escaping somewhere in that opening.

Having refreshed my memories from back then, I instinctively swung the sword in my right hand the moment I noticed a long, thin shadow nimbly crossing past at a corner of my sight. I felt a little resistance, but all that rolled to my feet from the smoke was a familiar golden hat.

I stepped forward in pursuit, but the poisonous-looking fumes assailed my throat with a pricky pain the moment I breathed it in and drove me into a coughing fit.

"Chudelkin…!!"

Alice cried out with her left hand covering her mouth and leapt out in pursuit of the shadow. Chudelkin had escaped not towards the door connecting to the Chamber of Elders, but deeper into the room. Thinking about how there shouldn't be an exit there, I held my breath and dashed forth as well, with a lowered stance.

However, what we saw beyond the smokescreen was the golden drawers slid to the right and a hidden passage open behind it. We peeked in, just in time to see a shadow of a round head atop with a ridiculously lean body and limbs escaping with agility.

"Hohii!! Hohi—hii-hii-hii-hii—!!:

The piercing laughter reached my ears as I continued coughing.

"Arts aren't all to a performance, you idiots! Ii—diots!! Go ahead and come after mee, I'll put my all into entertaining you next timee, hoh—hoh, hoh——!!"

The laughter continued like a broken toy's, alongside short, quick footsteps.

4

Alice and I had stopped for a mere five seconds.

We exchanged glances and I took the lead, plunging into the narrow passage. Fortunately, there didn't seem to be anything poison in the red fumes I inhaled a little of—though that was based on the reasoning that Chudelkin wouldn't have done too well with poison in his clothes—and the coughing settled down in time too.

The hidden passage fitted Chudelkin and we would knock our heads on the ceiling if we didn't stoop. The scratching sounds coming from behind every now and then must be the sound of Alice's shoulder armor scrapping the walls. I, too, continued to run in a rigid posture while the sheath of the Blue Rose Sword hanging off the right of my waist banged into the wall.

Ascending stairs came into sight at the front before long, so we stood still for a moment before jumping on after confirming there weren't any signs of an ambush. Chudelkin's footsteps had already vanished and nothing but cold air flowed from our gloomy path.

The stairs were far longer than expected, taking up practically three of the cathedral's floors. Judging from the height of the ceiling, I believe the Chamber of Elders, where those who Chudelkin described as «automated elders» were housed, made up floors ninety-six to ninety-eight, so the ninety-ninth floor would likely be at the end of these stairs.

The battle against the Axiom Church that started from the underground jail—along with the two-year journey Eugeo and I went on that started from Rulid Village would end in another two floors. My partner wasn't by my side right now, but I should be able to reunite with him in the highest minister's room if Knight Commander Bercouli's words prove true. I will return his Blue Rose Sword to him and the three of us, including Alice, will defeat Chudelkin and the highest minister. And after that……

I lightly shook my head and focused on the faint lighting visible at the end of the stairs. I had all the time to think about what would happen next after everything was over. Now was the time to concentrate on the final battle.

It was when I focused my mind, almost slipping away to the past and future, back to the present, that I faintly heard the chief elder's shrill voice from our path.

"*System caaaaall! Generaaate…*"

A chant for an elemental art. My wariness spiked, but we couldn't stop here. The illumination from in front rapidly closed in.

"…We're nearly at the end of the stairs!"

I curtly replied when Alice cried out a warning from behind.

"Watch out for an ambush by sacred arts!"

“Got it!”

Nodding, I braced my black sword in front as I ran. Magic was handy for surprise attacks in this world where *elements* could be prepared and maintained. By generating a thermal element and changing its form, then standing by, it could be *discharged* like a firearm the moment the enemy got within sight.

However, on the other hand, the firepower of arts was determined solely by the number of elements consumed. A single element used would basically result in the same firepower, whether it was a student who just started studying the sacred arts or a top-ranking art user who had trained for a long time. Many elements could be manipulated with adequate training, but each element required a finger to maintain, so the limit at a single time was ten. My black sword with its nature of absorbing energy could even guard against a concentrated attack of ten thermal or cryogenic elements.

If Chudelkin was aiming for a surprise attack, it would be less risky to burst out from the stairs than to cautiously reveal myself. Having decided that, I sped up and dashed through the few remaining meters, jumping up high after kicking off the final step.

However, there were neither floods of flames nor downpours of icicles. Spinning around horizontally in midair, I looked around three hundred and sixty degrees, but neither Chudelkin nor anyone else was here. Landing on the marble floor, I pricked up my ears while down on one knee. All I could hear was Alice’s footsteps chasing after me.

Alice showed herself the moment I brought my body up. The knight scanned through our surroundings like I did, then spoke with a frown.

“I believe I heard chanting, but there isn’t anyone here, is there… Did Chudelkin give up on a surprise attack and ran away above… to the hundredth floor…?”

Following Alice’s lead in glancing towards the ceiling, I muttered.

“But there’s just the highest minister’s room up there, right? Even with his status, the chief elder can’t just enter without permission, can he?”

“I doubt he can, but… in the first place, where are the stairs leading up?”

I took another look around the circular room that was probably the ninety-ninth floor as prompted.

Spacious. The diameter likely measured around thirty meters. The floor, ceiling, and curving wall were all made from that same marble I now felt used to, but there were surprisingly little decorative features. There were just the large lamps curling around the wall at most, but only four were lit at the moment, so it was dim. Though that only made sense since the room was pure white all over and would become blinding if they were all lit.

The stairs connected to Chudelkin's room where we climbed up from was wide open at the floor bordering the wall. It had a marble flip-up door attached and would likely blend in perfectly with the floor when closed.

In that case, there might be a pull-down door hiding the stairs up somewhere in the ceiling. I tried searching for any cords or handles with that in mind, but I couldn't seem to see anything of that sort. Guess I might as well hit the ceiling with a sword skill now; that then happened while I was hardening my grip on the sword in my right hand.

"……This room…"

Alice murmured all of a sudden. Turning around, I saw the knight's blue left eye opened slightly.

"What is it?"

"……I know this room. This is… where I woke up as an integrity knight apprentice six years ago……"

"Eeh… you sure!?"

"Yes… All of the wall lamps were lit then… the room shone radiantly with light… The esteemed highest minister stood in the middle and talked to me as I laid down. Awaken, child of the gods… she said…"

Alice must have realized how her speech had gained a respectful tone too. With a slight grimace, she continued with more strength.

"…The esteemed highest minister gave me, who had lost my previous memories, a false past and my mission as a knight, then entrusted me to oji-sama… Knight Commander Bercouli. There was a depression somewhere on the floor, like the elevating disk constructed at the middle floors, that brought oji-sama and me to the ninety-fifth floor back then. I have never been here again since then."

"A depression on the floor…?"

Inclining my head, I tried stomping on the marble floor with the sole of my boots. But I only felt the firmness of thick stone. It would be silly searching this vast room for a hidden elevator and in the first place, we had no need for a method to go downstairs.

"Alice, do you remember how Administrator returned to her room at that time?"

The knight pondered over my question with a finger from her left hand on her lips.

"I believe… that immediately before the elevating disk oji-sama and I rode sank into the floor… the esteemed highest minister look up at the ceiling… and a small elevating disk came from above…"

"That's it!"

Shouting so, I stared a hole into the pure white ceiling once more. Rather than a pull-down door, there was an elevator hidden somewhere there. However, I couldn't find anything like a switch even with another sweep. There wasn't anyone in charge unlike the elevator connecting the fiftieth and eightieth floors, so there must be some mechanism that automatically raises or lowers it. And that something…

"Ah… maybe the chief elder's chant earlier was…"

Alice also had a response for my murmuring.

"It wasn't an offensive art for a surprise attack, but to move an elevating disk…? In that case, Kirito, do you recall what Chudelkin had recited after «*generate*»?"

"E-Erm…"

Feeling that I couldn't give "I didn't hear it" as an answer here, I frantically replayed my memories from several minutes ago. If I recall right, following the *generate* command, the chief elder's squeaky voice continued with—

"Lu… *Lu*-something, I think…"

Alice emitted a freezing cold gaze at me as I agonized to recall the rest.

"That much is enough. The only one starting with 'lu' would be the luminous element."

Not sparing me any further attention as I nodded in agreement, Alice first returned the drawn sword in her right hand to its scabbard, then held her ten lithe fingers up towards the ceiling.

"*System call! Generate luminous element!*"

Amazingly, the number of luminous elements generated was the theoretical limit of ten. Alice released the white points of light wandering about her fingertips in a radial pattern without modification. The luminous elements struck against various spots on the ceiling, one after another, without making a sound. One among them all let out a stronger radiance—a circle of light with a diameter of around one meter appeared on the ceiling while that thought crossed my mind. Its position wasn't in the middle, but rather close to the wall.

I moved beside Alice who had lowered her hands and warily watched over the phenomenon. The circle of light immediately faded but didn't vanish, and eventually, outlined by the boundary, a part of the marble ceiling smoothly protruded out and gently descended. The slate with a thickness of over fifty centimeters must be absurdly heavy, but it moved without any hint of that. The luminous element must have only served as a switch and the slate used some other source of energy for its movement, I couldn't tell how it had been constructed. It was practically parallel to the various miracles the sage, Cardinal, displayed in the Great Library Room… no, it must have been so. What powered this elevator must be just a mere part of the unfathomable capabilities the highest minister, Administrator, possessed.

The elevator—or elevating disk, as Alice called it, barely jolted as landed upon the floor. Its surface was laid over with bright red carpeting rather than bare marble, mildly gleaming as bluish white light rained down from the circular hole in the ceiling.

And the path to the top floor of the Central Cathedral was now open.

The greatest and last battle will finally begin when Alice and I step onto that elevating disk and arrive at the hundredth floor.

The initial plan was to stab Administrator with our secret weapon, that dagger, while she slept and to leave the rest to Cardinal. However, the highest minister must have awoken with Chudelkin fleeing to the hundredth floor and in the first place, I had already used up my dagger to save Deputy Knight Commander Fanatio.

But fortunately, though I wonder if I could consider it so, Knight Alice had consented to return her personality to the original Alice. Hence, there was no longer any need for the dagger Eugeo held to be used on Alice. We would first rescue Eugeo who had been taken to the hundredth floor before us and was likely still frozen, then stab Administrator with the dagger while she still had her guard down. We likely had no chance at winning with any other strategy.

It appeared Alice had steeled own her will as well in the meantime.

Exchanging looks, we nodded once, and spoke.

"…Let's go."

"Let us move."

Thus, Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty and I, the expert swordsman-in-training, Kirito, took a step towards the elevating disk fifteen meters away.

One step, two, three—and it happened.

The pale blue light that was probably moonlight pouring down from the hole in the ceiling abruptly darkened.

Glaring beams of bright light shone into my eyes as I stood still and looked up at the hole. It was the moonlight reflected from an elegantly designed metal armor. A long mantle fluttered as someone slowly descended from the hole in the ceiling, six meters high, covered from head to toe in heavy armor.

Judging from the height, it couldn't possibly be Chudelkin. I wondered if the highest minister herself had bothered to come down to the ninety-ninth floor, but that was a man's physique. With his face concealed due to the backlight.

"There was still another integrity knight…?"

I muttered—

"That armor should… no, but still…"

And Alice whispered; the new knight landed upon the elevating disk with a graceful metallic sound in the next moment. Absorbing the impact by bending his knees, he gently stood up.

The armor was silver with traces of blue. The surface that seemed somewhat translucent gleamed brilliantly as it took in the moonlight. The mantle was a rich blue and as far as I could see, there weren't any swords on his waist. His lowered face was hidden by a large gorget, but his wavy hair was… a mellow flaxen.

A shudder tore through my entire body like a bolt of lightning in that instant.

That hair color. The color that always accompanied me throughout these two years I spent in the Underworld.

No way. But still. Why?

In my vision, the knight finally raised his face as I stood still, assailed by extreme confusion. Green eyes stared straight back from beyond those somewhat downcast eyelids. I couldn't deny it any longer. The boy who wore the integrity knight armor was……

"……Eugeo……"

I called out his name in a barely audible gasp.

I couldn't possibly mistake him, of all people, for anyone else. The peerless friend and partner always with me ever since we met in the forest south of Rulid. I could have only gotten this far thanks to Eugeo's presence by my side. There was absolutely no chance I could mistake his face for anyone else.

However, the expression Eugeo's eyes and mouth made as he silently stood still was unfamiliar. No, that couldn't be considered as an expression. It was as inhuman as ice, colder than what Alice had on when we first encountered her in the Sword Mastery Academy's large auditorium.

"Eugeo."

I called out to him once again, at a reasonable volume this time, somehow. However, the cold light that filled his two eyes didn't even waver slightly. Not that he ignored me. He was currently sizing me up. Possibly… as an enemy to cut down.

"…It couldn't be… it's too fast."

Alice abruptly murmured by my side and I asked imploringly in return.

"What is… too fast…?"

“The completion of the ritual.”

Sparing me a glance, the golden knight showed slight hesitation before speaking out with resolve.

“Your partner… Eugeo **had already went through *synthesis***.”

Synthesis—the ritual. Direct manipulation of the fluct light only Administrator was capable of. Robbing one of one’s memories and incorporating loyalty… to prepare one as an integrity knight.

“…No way, that’s… but it took three days and three nights for you…”

Alice calmly replied as I dismissing that thought, childishly shaking my head.

“The chief elder had said that was because I refused to recite the art necessary for it. In other words, the three-day ritual wouldn’t be needed if one recited that art… But still, this is far too fast. Only mere hours should have passed since Eugeo fought against oji-sama…”

“That’s right… it’s not real, Eugeo couldn’t have just, so easily…… This must be some sort of illusionary art or……”

My body haphazardly tried to walk forward, not even conscious of what I was saying.

But Alice’s left hand firmly gripped my loosely hanging right arm without warning. Accompanied by a voice at my ear.

“Get a hold of yourself! You won’t be able to salvage anything by breaking down now!”

“Sal… salvage…?”

“Yes! You said this yourself, that there is a way to give an integrity knight back their original memories! By that logic, you can return Eugeo back to normal too! We will have to get through this situation somehow to do that!!”

A feverish strength of will flowed into me from the wrist touching Alice’s palm as she continued her fierce rebukes, breathing life into my chilly, numb body. I firmly renewed the grip on my black sword that had apparently almost slipped from my hand.

Yes—Alice was right. Eugeo's memories and personality definitely weren't gone. They were simply denied from surfacing due to an operation performed on a part of his fluct light.

By taking back the «memory fragment» Administrator had stolen from him and getting Cardinal to recombine them, Eugeo would return to the gentle and easygoing swordsman I knew. And for that, I needed to converse and to gather information. To persuade the personality currently manipulating Eugeo and to open a path… it might not even be impossible to gain his cooperation. I got through to Knight Alice with words in the end, despite how unapproachable she was.

"…Please leave this to me."

When I whispered so to Alice, still holding onto my right hand, the knight showed a little hesitation before she nodded. Releasing her hand, she quickly spoke while taking a step back.

"Understood. However, do not let your guard down. That knight… is not the Eugeo you knew any longer."

"Yeah."

Alice silently widened our distance after I replied.

To be honest, no matter how strong Eugeo got after turning into an integrity knight, rendering him powerless would likely be easy with Alice's armament full control art—transforming the Fragrant Olive Sword into countless petals and enveloping the enemy in a lethal storm. That was how overwhelming Alice's technique was. However, I would prefer that as the last resort of last resorts, one used after all other means were exhausted. I didn't wish for harm to come to Eugeo's body and making two childhood friends, both with their memories sealed away, fight each other would be too cruel.

I took a step forward and stared straight into Eugeo's eyes, the same old icy light still within them.

"Eugeo."

My third call was neither jittery nor hoarse.

"Do you recognize me? I'm Kirito… your partner. We've always been together since we left Rulid two years ago, right?"

The boy wrapped in bluish silver armor kept his silence for another few seconds, then finally opened his mouth.

"…I apologize, I don't know you."

Those were the first words from Knight Eugeo. The mellow tone of voice was exactly as I recalled, but it was tinged with an icy texture like his facial expression.

It appeared his memories before synthesis really were sealed away, but there shouldn't had been enough time to implant the usual «summoned from the Celestial World» sort of false memories. There was a huge blank in Eugeo's self-awareness. If I press that issue…

"But thanks."

My eyes opened wide when Eugeo betrayed my expections and continued. I asked, with more hope than sensible, in reply to the sudden cordial words.

"…For what?"

However, Eugeo's reply—

"For bringing my sword back to me."

"Eh……"

After spending a short while dumbfounded, I looked down at the right of my waist. The sacred instrument, the Blue Rose Sword, hung off there in its sheath of white leather. Looking up, I asked again.

"What do you… plan to do with this sword?"

Those green eyes blinked and Eugeo spoke as though it was only natural.

"To fight the two of you. That is what that person had wished for."

"……"

As expected—he had came down to this room to drive Alice and me away. On instructions from «that person», the highest minister, Administrator.

I stood my ground even as I felt my modest hopes going off in the distance.

“Eugeo. do you plan on following someone’s instructions… those of a person who you don’t even know, and fighting without a proper reason? We aren’t your enemies. You’ve came all this way to fight against the highest minister and rescue your precious childhood…”

“I don’t care for a reason to fight.”

Something akin to emotion emerged on Eugeo’s face for the first time when he interrupted my words, disappearing immediately after.

“That person had given me what I wanted. That is enough for me.”

“What you wanted…? Is that more important than Alice?”

It seemed his pale face quivered with a trace of emotion the instant he heard the name that should hold more significance to him than anything else. However, that, too, was shrouded away by cold ice.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to know. I don’t want to know about you… or anyone else. I had enough already…… is just……”

After muttering in a voice so faint I couldn’t catch it, Eugeo slowly got off the elevating disk and held out his right hand towards me.

“I have nothing more to say to you. Let us fight… isn’t that why the two of you are here?”

“……We aren’t here to fight with you, Eugeo. That’s why I won’t return this sword.”

Saying so in a stifled voice, I switched my black sword to my left hand and removed the Blue Rose Sword from my sword belt with my right. With my sight fixed on Eugeo, I entrusted it to Alice, standing behind, by—

“You don’t have to hand it over.”

The white sheath was snatched away from my right hand the moment I heard those words. Not by Alice. The sword glided through the air like pulled by invisible strings and moved towards Eugeo’s hands as he stood over ten meters away.

—Sacred arts!? Did I miss him chanting it…!?

I heard a crisp whispered from behind upon swallowing my breath.

“The incarnation arm…!”

“What’s that supposed to…”

I asked with my sight kept forward and Alice quickly explained.

“It’s a secret art handed by the integrity knights of old. To move an object by neither sacred arts nor full control arts, but by the power of one’s will… I heard there were only a few people among the knights who could use it, aside from oji-sama.”

“So, that means you can’t use it either, Alice?”

“…I had practiced, but I can’t even move a pebble, let alone a sacred instrument. It shouldn’t be the sort of art Eugeo could acquire immediately after becoming a knight…”

The Blue Rose Sword was delivered to Eugeo’s right hand even while Alice and I exchanged words, and he hung the sheath off his armor, on the left of his waist. He then gripped its handle and drew it out without hesitation in the same motion. A chill rose from its faintly translucent blade as white mist.

I had no choice but to switch my black sword back and to hold it before myself.

Eugeo and I had faced off in this manner countlessly over these two years. However, our hands had always held the wooden swords for practice; the black sword and the Blue Rose Sword never had a chance to confront each other.

Nevertheless—

So the time had finally come; such strong emotions surged into my mind. Yes, I had the suspicion that this moment would arrive since that day we set out from Rulid.

However, that comprised solely of our swords clashing in our place. The conclusion of the said battle had yet to be decided. I had no intention of letting anyone else determine the result—not even the highest minister herself.

“Eugeo.”

I spoke out the last words I had for him.

“I guess you don’t remember, but I’m the one who taught you how to fight with a sword. There’s no way I’m going to lose to my pupil just yet.”

But Eugeo’s mouth remained closed. Instead, the Blue Rose Sword smoothly raised overhead and he shifted into a sword skill activation stance. One-handed straight sword charging skill, «Sonic Leap».

Feeling a little glad that he hadn’t forgotten his Aincrad-style swordsmanship even if he had forgotten my name, I took up the same stance.

The two swords released a vivid, light green glow.

And a second passed.

Both Eugeo and I kicked off the marble floor as one.

(To Be Continued)

Afterword

Kawahara here. Thank you very much for taking the time to read "Sword Art Onine 13 Alicization Dividing".

The Alicization that started from the 9th volume had already sped on to its fifth volume, but with a boss-like person finally making an appearance, I can breathe a… no, I suppose it's not time to relax yet, huh… Continuing on from the previous volume, this 13th volume is basically about climbing up too. The kanji used are "climbing up" for walls and "going up" for stairs; a real strain for proofreading as the author! And my apologies for the additional trouble, proofreader!

I digress. In any case, it's not quite the last boss battle yet, but Alice Synthesis Thirty-san, also the reason for the subtitle, is finally featured as the third protagonist in this volume. Just how would the girl confront the system that binds her and open a path up to her fate of her choice… that would be the main theme in the text, so I would be glad if you could cheer on both Kirito and Eugeo.

And Eugeo-shi there had ended up *class changing* into an advanced job right before the end… Whether Kirito would have a chance at victory while he remains a swordsman, or if he would have to undergo a class change as well; it just had to get pushed onto the next volume after things got to that point, so despite how often as this happens, I'm very sorry! Volume 14 would truly be the fight against the last boss, Administrator-san, so please have a little more patience!

…Or so I wrote, but I'm truly sorry to say that the next SAO is planned to be the 2nd volume of Progressive. Kirito and Asuna, left separated in the real world and Underworld in the Alicization arc, would be joining together to clear Aincrad's third floor, so I hope for your support on that end as well.

And a little advertising here. I believe it would be mentioned on the wrapper for this book as well, but a special program for the television anime edition of SAO will be broadcasted at the end of this year (2013). It would basically be a summary of the Aincrad and Fairy Dance arcs televised in 2012, but there should be a short, new segment as well. Kirito and the rest would be moving on television screens again after a whole year, so please, take a look.

To the illustrator, abec-san, the supervisor, Miki-san and Tsuchiya-san, and everyone who had read this far, I apologize for troubling you with the delays in my schedule which are practically the norm now, and thank you very much. Let's meet again in the next book!

A Certain Day in June, 2013 Kawahara Reki

Notes

DD-127 in the real world is Isoyuki, a Hatsuyuki-class destroyer. However, the real question is why DD-128 wasn't used instead…

Piton – Pitons are metal spikes used in climbing stuff, by driving them into holes or gaps. However, the original word used here was "haken", a German word commonly used in Japanese to refer to that, rather than an English word.

Kip – A manoeuvre used in gymnastics.

"Sky Garden" – It's written as "Sky Garden", rather than "Cloudtop Garden" here. Might be a typo?

"hit my pocket" – From a Japanese song for children, called "Fushigi na Poketto".

"oji-sama" – Uncle. Doesn't have to be a real, blood-related uncle. It's just a lot less awkward than using "uncle".

"WLSS" – **Double**-edged, **L**ong **S**word, **S**ingle-hand (written in katakana). "W" represents "Double".

"Rebelling Index" – Written in katakana, compared to "transgression quotient" which is translated from kanji.

9784048917575

ISBN978-4-04-891757-5
C0193 ¥570E

1920193005707

ASCII
MEDIA
WORKS

発行● アスキー・メディアワークス

定価: 本体 570 円
※消費税が別に加算されます

川原 礫（かわはら れき）

夏は自宅に閉じこもり気味なのでソロレベルが自動的に上がります。今年は一回くらい誰かと海に行ってレベルを下げたいです。

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